

## Blinded By The Spotlight

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# **Blinded By The Spotlight**

by [NightingaleWitch7](#)

## Summary

An unfortunate accident occurs, one that shakes everyone down to the core. Someone gets hurt, and some try to cope with this new situation while others are reeling from this new information. How will everyone deal with this? And how much will this affect the Digital Circus as a whole?

# Chapter 1

“YOU’RE DOING GREAT, MY DEAR! KEEP IT UP!”

Pomni wasn’t sure if Caine was being serious, or just being his over-enthusiastic self. It was hard to tell with someone who only had floating eyes inside a large gaping toothy mouth. She hoped he was being sincere. She had been doing this daunting task for what felt like hours.

Or what felt like hours to her. Pomni wasn’t sure just how long she had been doing this. Caine had, once again, thrown her into a dangerous stunt for the show. Though this time, it was only a practice run. Meaning that there wasn’t an ‘audience’ to watch her fail or get hurt for their twisted entertainment. Aside from Jax.

“Hey Pomni! You doing alright up there?” The teasing note in Jax’s voice was hard to miss, and Pomni knew he was enjoying every second of her suffering right now. “Make sure not to look down!” He added with a less than helpful reminder of what she was desperately trying hard **NOT** to do.

“Jax! Stop that!” Ragatha’s hiss was almost reassuring to the small jester, slightly hoping that she would keep the mischievous rabbit from doing any mean pranks while Pomni was stuck up here. “You’re doing great, Pomni! You’re almost to the end! Just hang in there a little longer!”

It was reassuring that the knowledge that she was almost done gave her hope that she would be done with this horrible stunt, but she desperately wanted to know how long a little longer was. Was it a minute? Two minutes? Seconds? Or was Caine going to add more time and keep her stuck up here on this death trap of an unstable tower she was on top of?

Caine had, once again, put her in a dangerous stunt that she wanted absolutely NO part of but, once again, forced to do so under the AI’s whim and demand.

The stunt had her placed on top a high stack of chairs, all placed in the shape of the Eiffel Tower, with her being on the very top, balancing on a single chair. It wasn’t so bad. For the first few seconds when Caine plopped her up here, but then he just had to make it ‘more interesting and intense’ and snapped a large heavy barbell into her hands that she had to hold for a specific amount of time. What was worse, he added TEACUPS to the mix, all balanced on the barbell she was holding and one on her foot that she was meant to keep out.

So she was stuck standing on one foot, holding a heavy barbell, balancing teacups on both her foot and barbell, all while she was left on top of a very large, almost life size model of the famous Eiffel Tower made entirely out of chairs that swayed and shook and creaked like it was about to fall over at any given moment.

Not doing wonders for her anxiety right at the moment.

Pomni really hoped that she would be done soon. She **really** didn’t want to stay up here any longer than necessary. The sooner she was done with this stunt, the sooner she could quickly

get back to the ground.

Closing her eyes, Pomni tried to focus on something else. She tried not to think about the wobbly, highly likely unstable platform she was on top of. She tried not to think about how her arms burned from the strain of holding the barbell with the massive amount of teacups stacked on top of it. She especially tried not to think how her leg was aching and felt ready to give out under her weight at any second.

Instead, she tried to focus on her beating heart, counting how fast her pluses went through her body. She tried to focus on the aroma coming from the teacups, racking her brain to see if she could remember the smell of specific tea. And she tried to focus on the sounds, highly ignoring the creaks and moans coming from the tower and instead focused on the voices of her friends far below.

It was hard to make out what they were saying, but Pomni could just make out each voice of the person they belonged to.

The anxious and frightened tone of Kinger. The hollow but sweet voice that belonged to Gangle. A huffy and almost flat tone that was criticizing the tower's uneven and poor replication of the tower it was crafted after almost made Pomni smile at Zooble's perfectionism. Ragatha's worried questioning tone gave some sense of security, though it was drowned out by Caine's loud and boisterous voice that was very, very hard to miss. Jax was being awfully quiet, and Pomni wasn't sure if she should be extremely worried about that.

There was no telling if that rabbit was behaving himself, and it scared Pomni that he was up to something. His pranks were less than friendly, and she did not want one sprung on her when she was so close to being done with this stunt.

And hope that Caine wouldn't have her doing this again.

"POMNI!"

A scream tore out of her throat, her balance shaking. She barely managed to regain it again when Caine appeared in front of her, too close to her comfort. "C-Caine?!"

"JUST THOUGHT I'D POP IN REAL QUICK AND TELL YOU THAT YOU'RE ALMOST DONE!" He pulled out a large pocket watch from... somewhere, holding it out for her to see the colorful twisted arms of the clock and upside down numbers. "JUST A MINUTE LEFT BEFORE THE BIG FINALE!"

Pomni should have felt some form of relief that she was almost done, but knew better than to expect anything easy with Caine. "F-finale? What finale?"

"WHY THE FIREWORKS OF COURSE! A FINE FINISH TO THIS SHOW, DON'T YOU THINK?!"

"Is... Is that... safe?" Pomni asked, already feeling the dread flowing through her body. She already knew the answer, but she still hoped that the wacky AI was only joking and drop all the danger and harm he put her and the others through.

“SAFE?! HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!” Her hope dropped like a stone as Caine doubled over in laughter. “YOU’RE A RIOT, DARLING!” Pomni nearly lost her balance again when Caine slapped her back. “WE DON’T DO SAFETY FOR OUR PERFORMANCES! IT WOULD TAKE AWAY ALL THE CHARM!”

Pomni was sure that the charm wasn’t the only thing that would be taken away.

“BESIDES! THERE’S NO POINT TO THAT! UNLESS YOU’RE STILL WORRIED THAT YOU MIGHT DIE, WHICH YOU WON’T! THERE’S NO CHANCE OF YOU DYING FROM THIS OR ANY OF THE PERFORMANCES!”

“Can’t they be a little less painful?!” Pomni pleaded, but Caine had already teleported away. She knew she shouldn’t be hurt by this, that she should have expected Caine not to listen, but it still stung. Somewhere deep inside, she hoped that Caine wasn’t all bad. She had seen a few hints of him trying to be better. It was never much, but Pomni hoped that they could change his mind or convince him that what he was doing was wrong.

He seemed rather oblivious to their pain.

*‘Need to keep looking.’* She thought inwardly, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath to calm her racing nerves. *‘We just need to keep looking for a way out. There has to be some way to get out of this place.’* She kept repeating this to herself, repeating the memento in her head over and over, willing to believe there was a way out of this world.

She desperately wanted to believe that there was a way out. There just had to be one. She just needed to find it.

“WELL FOLKS! IT SEEMS THAT OUR DEAR LITTLE JESTER HAS ALMOST COMPLETE THE REQUIRED TIME!” Caine yelled from far below, and Pomni hoped that her torment would be over soon. She wanted to run back to her room and rest all her aching limbs and never do another stunt again. “BUT BEFORE THAT, IT’S TIME FOR THE BIG FINALE! GET READY FOLKS! THIS IS SURE TO BE A SIGHT YOU’LL NEVER FORGET!”

Pomni didn’t doubt it.

There were plenty of sights that Pomni would never forget. Though she hoped that this wouldn’t be as extreme of a sight like the rest of them. Maybe if she kept her eyes closed, she wouldn’t have to see the horrors Caine threw at her in this place.

More than once Pomni wished she didn’t have to see the crazy world she was stuck in. That she didn’t need to see the torment and horrors this place seemed to be filled with. That, for just once, she could pretend that this was all a dream like Jax had jokingly teased once, and that she would open her eyes back into the human world. Back home where she belonged.

“IS THAT A CANNON?!” Kinger’s shrill shriek echoed from far below, causing Pomni to open her eyes and look down.

... She deeply wished that she hadn’t.

The drop below was staggering, almost never ending as Pomni looked down. She normally wasn't afraid of heights, but her stomach was doing flips and twists the longer she gazed down, her vision went in and out, and sweat pooled down her skin. Her body shook as her throat constricted, becoming hard to breath and stay focused.

She didn't realize how far up she was, or how far below the ground was. Had Caine actually made this to be as tall as the Eiffel Tower? Or had he made it bigger? Both sounded terrifying, and she really didn't want to know which he picked.

She wanted this stunt to be over already, right now, but she knew that was impossible. And it didn't help her anxiety when she spotted the large cannon.

Pointing straight at her.



"Isn't this excessive?" Ragatha asked, gazing at the large weapon in concern. If she didn't have the knowledge that death was impossible in this place, she would have been more worried for Pomni's safety.

"EXCESSIVE? NONSENSE!" Caine floated up to the cannon. "THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS GOING TOO FAR, MY DEAR! AND THE FINALLY REQUIRES A BIG, OUTSTANDING, JAW DROPPING, EYE BULGING, HEART STOPPING FINISH! AND WHAT BETTER WAY TO DO THAT THAN WITH FIREWORKS FROM A CANNON?!"

"Maybe one that's not pointing at Pomni?" Ragatha suggested. She felt bad for the newbie, worried that Caine might push her too far with his antics. At least she couldn't see the cannon from way up there. Poor Pomni would have a heart attack if she saw the size of the cannon.

"NONSENSE! IT NEEDS TO BE PERFECTLY ALIENED TO BRING OUT THE BEST FINALLY THIS AUDIENCE HAS EVER SEEN!"

"I thought this was a practice run?" Jax said, leaning against one of the tower's legs. It creaked and groaned under his weight, and Ragatha was just about to drag him away by the ear when Caine's laugh stopped her.

"PRACTICE? HA HA HA! I'M AFRAID NOT MY FINE FELLOW FRIEND! THERE'S ALWAYS AN AUDIENCE WATCHING WHEN A PERFORMANCE IS ON STAGE!"

"What?!" Ragatha couldn't believe what she was hearing. "No practice? So you *lied* to Pomni?"

"RATIONAL DECEPTION, MY DEAR!" Caine winked at her. "WHAT POMNI DOESN'T KNOW WOULDN'T KILL HER! LITERALLY! BESIDES, CALL THIS MORE AS A CONFIDENCE BOOST!" The AI ringleader adjusted the cannon, pointing to the tip of the tower. "LET HER THINK THAT IT'S A PRACTICE RUN! IT'LL GIVE HER THE COURAGE TO PERFORM MORE ONCE SHE REALIZES JUST HOW WONDERFUL OF A PERFORMER I KNOW SHE IS!"

"I don't know." Ragatha looked back up, pondering over Caine's words. Some of his logic made sense... slightly, but on the other hand, Ragatha wasn't sure if this was the way to go to deal with Pomni's anxiety. The poor little jester could get so nervous sometimes, she could give Kinger a run for his money with how nervous she could be. But at the same time, what she didn't know wouldn't kill her, right?

No one could really die in this world, no matter how extreme or painful it was. Five of them had been around long enough to know death wasn't going to free them from their torment. Some of them had given up trying to find a way out, others were still in denial, and even fewer still hoped there was a way to escape. Pomni still hadn't come to accept that there wasn't a way out.

She was still new, and didn't have a full grasp on everything just yet or that there was no escape. Yet Pomni kept trying. Despite her shy and nervous nature, Pomni was much braver than she gave herself credit for, always trying to find a way to escape at any chance she got. For such a shy and anxiety riddled being, the new stuff was very determined to find a way out, no matter what.

It was almost admirable. Not everyone was as hopeful as her.

"ALRIGHT FOLKS!" Caine's voice rattled the stage. "HERE!" He pulled out a match. "WE!" He struck the match, lighting it on fire and putting the flame next to the fuse. "GO!"

Everyone covered their ears as the cannon let out a thundering **BOOM**, shooting out fireworks in such fast succession that it was hard to keep track of how many came out. Not that anyone was counting. Most of the group was trying to dodge the wild projectiles that were whisking and dashing through the air.

Some of the fireworks exploded, sending showers of colorful fire raining down. Some of the cast caught on fire from the sparks, running around screaming their heads off as their bodies burned. Gangle's ribbon body was up in flames, and Ragatha's hair was in a blaze. Kinger was trying to outrun a firework that was chasing him around, and Zooble ducked and weaved away from any projectile that was coming their way, making use of their pull apart body at last second decisions. Jax was pointing and laughing at everyone's misery until a firework shot into his face and exploded.

The only one not running around or even slightly worried of the chaos going on was Caine, who was floating right beside the cannon with his usual oblivious stare.

The group weren't the only ones suffering from the fireworks.

The tower itself was being bombarded by the flying projectiles. Each side was hit with an explosion, causing it to tilt and sway at alarming angles. At the very top, screams of fear were drowned out by the endless explosions, dropping all the items on their possession, gripping the unsteady platform for dear life as the tower continued to sway.

For a solid minute, the fireworks kept coming with relentless assault, flying around aimlessly or exploding at random moments. Screams filled the stage, from below and high above. The

tower kept swaying, leaning this way before an explosion sent it the other way, its sole occupant screaming as she held on for dear life as the dangerous projectiles whistled past her.

Then, it stopped.

The fireworks and their bombarding attacks had ceased, leaving behind their destruction and chaos.

Everyone was still reeling from the mess, aside from Caine, who had his focus solely on the cannon. "HMM." He tapped his chin, looking at the cannon oddly. "THAT'S ODD." He tilted the cannon till it was pointing at the sky, peering one of his eyes inside. "I WAS SURE THERE WAS ONE MORE IN THERE." Shrugging, he moved his head away.

Just as he did, the cannon suddenly shot off again, firing a single missile that shot off into the ceiling and disappearing high above.

"AH HA! *THERE IT IS!*" Caine exclaim, somehow not bothered by the fact that his head had nearly been taken off just moments prior. "GOING A BIT HIGHER THAN I EXPECTED, BUT WHAT A FINALE!"

He clapped his hands together as everyone else picked themselves up and took a moment to catch their breath. Their burns quickly went away, and the pain that lingered slowly vanished as if it was never there to begin with. Just a wonderful quirk that almost felt like a curse.

Not so much for the tower though. It had taken the worst of it all, broken in various areas and burning hot with fires blazing bright. One of its legs was completely gone, and it tilted in an odd angle. Yet, it still remained standing despite its ruined condition.

"EXCELLENT PERFORMANCE EVERYONE! WHAT A SHOW!" Caine congratulated his cast. "THOUGH IT COULD HAVE BEEN A LITTLE BETTER, BUT I'M SURE THE NEXT SHOW WILL BE EVEN MORE MIND BLOWING THAN THIS ONE!"

"C-Can we go back to our rooms now?" Kinger nervously asked, his whole body shaking on the spot and looked ready to scream at any given moment.

"WELL—"

"Pomni!"

The panicked scream from Ragatha had everyone focused on her. The rag doll was looking at something that had her complete focus. Curious, they all turned their sight towards where she was looking at.

There, clinging on for dear life, was Pomni, dangling from the tower's top with her legs kicking uselessly in the air and far, far, far above the ground.

"Pomni!" Ragatha called out in worry. "Pomni, hold on!" She looked around, trying to find anything that could help the struggling jester.

“Oh G-G-G-Goodness! Pomni!” Kinger ran/hopped forward, rushing underneath the tilting top of the tower, holding his hands out as if he was trying to catch Pomni. Zooble and Gangle weren’t far behind him, copying the chess piece.

Jax on the other hand merely watched, slapping his head at one side to get the soot out of his other ear. The easy grin on his face suggested that he was enjoying the show, putting no effort to remind everyone that, even from a fall that high, Pomni wouldn’t die. She’d be hurt, but only for a moment. None of them could die, and none of them could sustain any serious injuries. All and any wounds inflicted upon them would disappear as instantly as it came. But it was still funny to watch everyone panic over nothing.

“WELL THIS WASN’T PART OF THE SHOW.” Caine appeared next to Jax, holding a large script in his hand. “BUT I LIKE IT!” He threw the script over his shoulder. “ALTHOUGH, THERE COULD BE SOME ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT!” Snapping his fingers, a large pool materialized beneath the dangling jester.

Kinger was so focused on Pomni, he didn’t notice the pool suddenly appearing until he rammed into it and fell inside. Gangle and Zooble came to a stop just before colliding with the pool, glancing at each other in confusion. Suddenly, an explosion of water along with a scream burst out, and Kinger appeared covered in piranhas.

“Not bad.” Jax smirked, enjoying the new entertainment. “But don’t you think you can go bigger?” He suggested with a sly smile.

“HM, YOU KNOW WHAT? YOU’RE RIGHT!” Caine snapped his finger, and a large shark was dropped into the pool just as Gangle and Zooble tried to pull Kinger out. The three screamed as the large fish surfaced, opening its jaws wide and bit down on Kinger’s robes, pulling him and the others back into the pool. “THERE WE GO!” The ringmaster nodded his head, satisfied with the new danger swimming underneath Pomni. “NOW FOLKS! WITNESS AS POMNI TANGLES WITH DEATH! WILL SHE BE ABLE TO ESCAPE IMPENDING TORMENT, OR WILL SHE FALL AND MEET HER FATE AT THE HANDS OF... BILL!”

The shark poked its head out of the water, giving the ‘audience’ a wave of their flipper with Kinger, Gangle, and Zooble sticking in various angles and parts out of its mouth with piranhas biting their limbs.

“Bill?” Jax looked at Caine in confusion.

“WHAT? IT’S HIS NAME. AND I CAN’T CALL HIM JAWS, IT WOULD BE COPYRIGHT INFRINGEMENT.” Caine shrugged. “AND STEVEN SPIELBERG IS STILL SUING ME FROM LAST TIME! CAN’T HAVE ANY MORE PROBLEMS WITH THE LAW ENFORCEMENT RIGHT NOW!”

While Jax wondered how an AI could get sued, Ragatha was in a panic. She had no idea on how to help Pomni, and now with a shark added in, it really wasn’t looking good. Pomni was struggling to pull herself up, kicking her legs and trying to scrabble on to anything she could get a grip on. Even from way up high, Ragatha could hear Pomni’s labored panicked breathing, no doubt in terror from the show and the situation she was currently in right now.

Kinger, Gangle, and Zooble had their own problem to deal with, currently trying to get away from Bill and get out of the pool, so they were no help. Jax was being no help as usual, and Caine was especially not going to be any help. He would make it worse in fact, so it was up to Ragatha to help Pomni.

Looking around, Ragatha tried to find something, anything she could use to help Pomni. Burnt and broken chairs were all that she could see, even as she went over and examined them closely for anything useful. A terrified scream from Pomni forced her to look hard, digging through the debris to find something. Anything.

Luck was smiling upon her when she overturned a broken chair, finding a firework that had miraculously stayed intact hidden underneath. As she picked it up, she noted that there was still some fuse left, which gave her an idea. Another scream, and this time Ragatha looked up, just in time to witness Pomni narrowly getting her foot bitten by Bill.

The shark had become impatient waiting for Pomni to fall, and tried to bring her down himself.

Seeing that Pomni was in danger, Ragatha looked around trying to see if there was anything she could use to light the firework. Fortune was still smiling upon her as she spied fire still burning on broken chairs. Rushing over, she broke off a piece of burning wood, holding it up to the fuse. It quickly caught alight, letting out a high pitch whistle as it shot off, flying through the air with twists and turns, ending its path right into Bill just as the shark was about to get his jaws on Pomni.

The impact caused an explosion, pushing the shark away from Pomni and sending the jester flying. Pomni flew through the air, her body flipping round and round before colliding with the leaning tower, far from the leaning top she had been hanging from mere moments ago. Bill wasn't as lucky.

The shark was sent spinning, slamming on the pool's edge, spitting up Kinger, Zooble, and Gangle along with several teeth.

There was a tense silence that fell over the group. And then Jax started laughing.

"NOW THAT'S A SHOW!" Caine said, pleased with the show as Jax fell over, kicking his legs up in the air and holding his stomach, howling with laughter. "WHAT A PERFORMANCE EVERYONE! GREAT WORK!" He gave a round of applause to the trapped souls, still oblivious to their suffering. "GREAT WORK TODAY POMNI! NICELY DONE!" He called up to the shaken jester, giving her a thumbs up. "THAT ENDING WAS AMAZING! MAYBE WE SHOULD DO THAT MORE OFTEN!"

Pomni was too shaken by the events to respond, clinging on to the tower as her eyes became squiggles, showing her distress.

"Dude! That was awesome!" Jax said between his fits of laughter. "We should definitely do this again!"

"AGREED!"

“What?! No!” Ragatha marched over to the pair. “No no no! We shouldn’t!”

“WHY NOT? WASN’T IT A WONDERFUL SHOW?”

Ragatha took a deep breath, calming her nerves before speaking. “Caine, has it occurred to you that Pomni might not...” She struggled to find the right word. “*Like* being in this sort of performance?”

“NOT LIKE?” The AI blinked in confusion. “WHAT’S THERE NOT TO LIKE? A PERFORMANCE LIKE THAT SOUND BE ONE THAT EVERYONE IS GRIPPING TO BE A PART OF!”

“Not sure about that.” Ragatha muttered under her breath, taking a small glance at the small group picking themselves up and pulling piranhas and teeth off them. Clearing her throat, she turned her focus back on Caine, hoping to reason with the AI. “But, uh, maybe Pomni isn’t quite ready for this particular stunt.”

“... NOT... READY?”

“Right, exactly! I mean, you did tell her that this was supposed to be a ‘practice run’, right? To boost Pomni’s confidence?” Ragatha really hoped Caine would consider thinking about this. REALLY think about this. She wasn’t sure how much more Pomni could take being exploded today. “Annnnnnd she dropped the tea and barbell!” She pointed at the items, which were laying about, broken on and in the stage. “And if I remember correctly, she was supposed to hold all those props for a certain amount of time, which I’m pretty sure she didn’t. I don’t think that’ll boost anyone’s confidence if they realized that they failed.”

“OH!” Caine exclaimed, looking at the items and nodding his head. “I SEE.”

“So,” Tapping her hands together. “Maybe Pomni still needs some practice before doing something like that again?” She really hoped that Caine would see the logic in this. To reconsider and spare Pomni from going through the nightmare of this stunt again.

Caine was quiet for a moment, then burst out laughing.

“YOU ARE A FUNNY ONE RAGATHA, MY DEAR!” He chuckled as Ragatha’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “BUT YOU DO MAKE A RATHER FAIR POINT.” He added, making her perk up slightly. “POMNI!” He called up to the jester. “MAKE YOU WAY DOWN HERE, MY DEAR! WE’LL BE DOING ANOTHER PRACTICE RUN! BUT ON A MUCH SMALLER SCALE THIS TIME!”

“Why bother?” Jax’s voice caught the pair’s attention. “It’s just going to be the same result. Just keep the show as it is, it’s more funny that way.”

“Jax! Stop it!” Ragatha growled at the rabbit, glaring at him with her good eye. She quickly turned to Caine, putting on a sweet smile. “Don’t listen to him, Caine. He’s just being a jerk.”

“But I’m telling the truth. The show’s just fine as it is. Oh! But maybe you should add more fireworks! To put in more pizzazz as they say.”

“Jax!”

“Oh! Oh! You know what would make it even better? A moat! Filled with alligators and crocodiles! That’ll add WAY more drama!”

“Stop it Jax! Don’t give him any ideas!”

“A MOAT, HUH?”

“No, sir! Please, listen. Pomni’s confidence has really taken a hit after today, so maybe—”

“Maybe!” Jax cut in, blocking Ragatha from Caine’s view. “You should add in more! Think about it! Knife juggling, fire breathing, chainsaws cutting away at the tower!” He continued, talking over Ragatha as she tried to stop him and make Caine see to reason. “Can you imagine how awesome and funny that would be?”

“I LIKE YOUR WAY OF THINKING JAX!”

“NO! STOP!” Ragatha got between them, shoving them apart. “This is NOT the way you should be doing this! Think about Pomni! She’s all racked up with fear and anxiety! Adding more won’t do anything—”

“Except put on a good performance.” Jax cut in once again, earning a glare from the ragdoll.

“You’re not helping!”

“When have I ever been helpful?”

“Jax, I’m serious! Putting Pomni through all that will only scare her more!”

“What’s the harm in a little scare?”

“Little? *Little*? LITTLE?! Do you NOT see the damage done here?!” Ragatha motioned to the mess. “How can you look at it and say that it’s just a little scare?! Pomni was screaming for her life just minutes ago!”

“What’s the big deal? Afraid she was going to die?” Jax scoffed. “News flash, she can’t. None of us can. Or did you forget about that as well?”

“She can’t die but she can still get hurt! Honestly Jax, this is too much! Don’t you care how Pomni feels? Or how scared she is right now?” Ragatha frowned, shaking her head and sighing. “What am I saying? Of *Course* you don’t care! You never care! All you care about is watching people suffer for your sick twisted entertainment.”

“And is it so wrong?” Jax shrugged. “It’s pretty funny to watch someone take a tumble or run face first into a wall.”

“Not for everyone! Can’t you have a heart for once instead of a jerk?”

“Can’t you have a normal eye for once?” Jax reached up, tapping the button eye on Ragatha’s face. This proved to be a bad mistake, as Ragatha suddenly reached forward and wrapped her hands around Jax’s throat, giving it a hard squeeze, choking him.

“NOW NOW YOU TWO, THERE’S NO NEED TO FIGHT!” Caine appeared between them, splitting them up and keeping them apart. “YOU BOTH MAKE SOME VERY COMPELLING ARGUMENTS, BUT LET’S NOT GET OVER EMOTIONAL ABOUT IT.”

“She started it!” Jax pointed at Ragatha, who let out a huff and crossed her arms over her chest.

“IT DOESN’T MATTER, I’M ENDING IT! AND ENDING TODAY’S PERFORMANCE.” He looked up at Pomni, who was still in the same spot as before. “SHOWS OVER POMNI! EVERYONE’S HEADING OUT NOW!” He turned his attention to Jax. “NOW, YOU WERE SAYING ABOUT A MOAT?”

Ragatha let out a strangled yell, grabbing Caine’s shoulders and shook the AI. “Why aren’t you listening to me?! You can’t keep putting Pomni through all this! She’s not used to these stunts as the rest of us! You can’t keep throwing her into these situations or she’ll end up like Kinger! Or worse!”

“A second Kinger. That’d be pretty entertaining.” Jax mussed.

“SHUT UP JAX!”

“RAGATHA, RAGATHA, RAGATHA.” Caine grabbed the doll’s hands, forcing her to stop. “I CAN APPRECIATE THE CONCERN YOU HAVE FOR POMNI’S WELL BEING, BUT THERE’S NO NEED TO WORRY MY DEAR! SHE’S IN GOOD HANDS!”

“But—!”

“IT’S FINE!” Caine gave her shoulder a pat. “NO NEED TO GET WORKED UP! BESIDES, JAX HAS A POINT! DEATH ISN’T AN OPTION FOR THIS WORLD! AND POMNI CERTAINLY CAN’T DIE FROM THESE PERFORMANCES! I CAN ASSURE YOU OF THAT! WHETHER BY STABBING,” He produced a knife out of thin air. “POISON,” The knife was replaced by a dark green bottle with a skull and cross bone printed on it. “OR ANY OTHER DANGEROUS LIFE THREATENING SITUATIONS THAT MAY ARISE!” The bottle disappeared, and Caine toothy smile seemed to get bigger. “THERE’S NO CHANCE OF POMNI EVER DYING ON MY WATCH! IF DEATH WAS AN OPTION, IT WOULD BE MIND—!”

An explosion rang out, loud and powerful. The stage shook from the force and everyone, including Caine, were pushed by the shock wave, sending them sprawling to the ground.

“The ^#&\$?!” Jax shouted out, picking himself up and watching as the tower finally collapsed, falling to the ground in a heavy thud and covered in bright burning flames. He looked towards Ragatha, who looked back with wide worry and alarm. Had there been a missing firework?

“MY STAGE!” Caine cried out in alarm, floating high into the air as the stage caught ablaze. Smoke and heat wafted into the air, fire licking the curtains and burning away the heavy fabric. The ringmaster was in a panic, snapping his fingers multiple times and summoning various objects before finally settling on a fire extinguisher. A very large, and very big fire extinguisher.

“FIRE!” He pointed his cane at the growing blaze, and the extinguisher’s hose came to life, pointing its nozzle at the flames and shot out a jet of white foam. The fire let out a hiss when the foam touched it, extinguishing and leaving behind a dark mess.

Caine directed the nozzle towards any fire that was still burning, putting them out before they could do any more damage to the stage. Once the last of the embers were put out, the fire extinguisher was sent away, and Caine lowered himself as he surveyed the damage.

It wasn’t pretty. More than half of the curtains were burned away or covered in foam. The floor of the stage was ruined, and the mess that had once been the Eiffel Tower replica was now a large pile of burnt wood and ash.

“Wow.” Jax breathed out, taking in the sight as he and Ragatha got off the ground. “This is... wow.” He knew that the stage went through a lot during performances, but this was a new level he’d never seen before.

Ragatha was stunned into silence, looking at the mess with horror. She too had never seen the stage like this, and she was even worried how this could have happened. “Was it...” She spoke in a quiet voice. “Was it the last firework?”

“THAT...” Caine started. The AI looked at the damage, taking it all in and tried to process it. “THAT MIGHT BE THE CASE.” He finally said, letting out a sigh. “I DON’T KNOW HOW ELSE THIS COULD HAVE HAPPENED. AND I DON’T UNDERSTAND. MY FIREWORKS DON’T USUALLY PACK THIS HARD OF A PUNCH!”

“Do you even know what you put in them?” Jax asked.

“OF COURSE I DO!” Caine said confidently. “HALF OF THE TIME.” He added not even a beat after. “I’M NOT SURE ABOUT THE OTHER HALF. I’M NOT EVEN SURE IF I REMEMBER WHAT I PUT INTO THAT ONE!”

Jax and Ragatha shared a look, one worried and the other curious.

“Pomni!” Ragatha suddenly gasped, remembering that the small jester had been on the tower still when the explosion went off. She looked towards the remains, rushing over to see if Pomni was alright. “Pomni!?” She called out, looking around as Caine and, to her surprise, Jax followed after her.

The three looked about the destruction, trying to spy the familiar blue and red somewhere in the ash.

It should have been easy. Since no one could die or sustain any permanent injuries, Pomni should have popped up by now with no harm done except to her mentality. Yet as the three

searched, they couldn't find any trace of her. No jester shaped piles of ash, no shaking body under soot, no bright colors that stood out among the darkness.

Nothing.

"Pomni?" Ragatha peeked under a chair, which disintegrated into dust the moment she touched it. She looked at the other two, hoping they were having better luck than she was.

To her dismay, neither Jax nor Caine had found anything. The ringleader had been distracted by the damage done to his stage, and Jax fared no better in his search. Not even Gangle and Kinger, who had joined in to help when they realized that Pomni was in the explosion, had any luck finding her.

Ragatha was starting to worry that they would never find Pomni, but a voice from the far side of the stage brought some relief.

"I think I found her!"

Everyone minus Caine all hurried over to where Zooble was standing. The mix-and-match perfectionist was standing near a section where most of the curtains had been burned away or ripped apart. A large chunk of the fabric laid spooled on the ground, mixed in with broken debris that had been mixed in when the explosion went off. A familiar sized shape was underneath the curtain far inside, and Ragatha let out a sigh of relief.

Pomni was alright. She hadn't been in the explosion. It was worrying how still and quiet she was, but everyone just figured that she passed out from the explosion.

"Sheesh, Pomni, way to give us all a scare." Everyone glared at Jax, but the rabbit just grinned.

Done with Jax's jerkiness, Ragatha went to retrieve the small jester. However, her efforts were halted as the ground beneath her foot gave way, and she fell through the floorboards.

"Oh gosh! Ragatha! Are you okay?!" Gangle called down.

"I'm fine!" Ragatha's head poked out from the hole. "I'm fine. Though you might want to be careful. The floorboards are kind of unstable."

"I-I-I-If they're unstable, h-h-how are we going to reach Pomni?" Kinger asked.

"Easy." Jax scoffed, earning more glares from the group. "Just do a hop, skip, and a jump."

"Hop?"

"Sk-Sk-Skip?"

"And a jump?"

"Yep!" Jax shot them a wink and finger gun. "Just," He reached down, snatching Ragatha's cleaver from her pocket, much to her angry remarks. He ignored her, spinning the weapon in

his hand. “A,” He took a few steps back. “Hop!” With a surprising burst of speed, he lunged forward, jumping into the debris. “Skip!” He maneuvered his body over the obstacles, jumping over unsteady floorboards, and ducking under dangerous burnt columns broken wood. “And a jump!” He happily proclaimed once he reached the Pomni shaped object, proudly standing with a pose. “See? Easy!”

“Maybe for you, but the rest of us aren’t rabbits.” Zooble pointed out in their usual board tone, crossing their arms in a huff as Kinger and Gangle helped Ragatha out of the hole.

“Such a darn shame then.” Jax shrugged, grinning as he used the cleaver to cut through the thick fabric and peeked inside. “Anyway Pomni, rise and—” He suddenly went quiet.

Too quiet.

Too quiet and too still.

Figuring that he was pulling another prank, Ragatha rolled her eyes. “Jax, this isn’t the time to be fooling around.”

Jax didn’t move.

“Jax! It’s not funny! Quite goofing around!”

He still didn’t move.

“*Jax.*” Ragatha was seething, reaching her limit with the rabbit. “Quit being an absolute jerk already! I’m done with you stupid, childish, hurtful, selfish... mean...” She trailed off as Jax slowly turned his head. Something felt... off.

The usual carefree mischievous grin on Jax’s face was gone. His eyes were wide and there was noticeable shock and... fear?

That set off some alarms in everyone’s heads.

Jax wasn’t normally one to panic. Under the circumstances, he was more chill and relaxed, showing nothing but excitement of everyone’s misery and pain unless it was directed at him or directly in danger. To see him openly show fear on his face was a big red flag, and it didn’t help that he wasn’t saying anything.

“... Jax?” Now openly concerned, everyone wondered what could have made the rabbit react like this.

The rabbit turned his head, looking back into the hole he made. He looked... sick. Like he wanted to throw up and scream and cry all at the same time.

Worried more than ever, Ragatha moved to see what he was looking at. “Jax, what’s wrong? Is Pomni—”

“*Don’t!*” Ragatha froze in shock, taken aback by the panic lacing Jax’s voice. “Don’t! D- Don’t Rags!” His eyes remained glued to what was underneath the curtain, looking more and

more shaken by the second. “It’s. It’s not pretty.”

“What are you talking about?” Her worry was escalating, now more concerned for Pomni’s well being than ever. “Jax, what’s wrong with Pomni?”

“YOU FOUND POMNI?” Caine sudden materialized above Jax. “WONDERFUL! I WAS STARTING TO WORRY THAT SOMETHING BAD MIGHT HAVE HAPPENED TO HER!”

“I, I think something did.” Jax said. “I genuinely think she might need medical attention here.” That had everyone’s attention. Medical attention? What was he talking about?

“NONSENSE!” Caine waved away Jax’s worry, grabbing the curtain and looking inside as well. “SHE’S PERFECTLY FI—*GREAT SMOKE AND HARDWARE STORE DISCOUNTS!*” Caine screamed, dropping the curtain and shooting up into the air.

“I told you!” Jax shouted, looking into the hole.

“SHE! I! WHAT?! HOW?! WHAT?!?” Caine sputtered, flailing his hands about. He was freaking out so badly, they swore they saw some part of his body **glitch**.

Greatly concerned that even Caine was freaking out, everyone was even more alarmed. Caine **never** panicked. The AI probably didn’t know how to. To see him like this, over whatever laid beneath the curtain, really drove in the nail that something was definitely, truly, really wrong.

“Jax?” Ragatha squeezed her hands together, looking at the rabbit with fear. “Is...” She swallowed back a lump, her voice coming out quietly. “Is... is Pomni... alright?”

Jax looked at her.

He didn’t say a word, but it was enough for Ragatha and the others to know.

And then.

There was screaming.

## Chapter 2

Screams were nothing new to the Digital Circus.

They were actually quite common in a place like this.

Screams filled with terror and anguish would fill the halls and corridors, most commonly coming from one area that was reserved for the main show.

Then there were the screams filled with pain.

Those screams were often short, brief, or drawn out. Never as long as the screams of fear and horror. They were often too quick, or drowned out by terror, but they were still as common. Unless the person was glitching. Then the scream could be drawn out in a static, jumbled, glitching mess.

Not this scream.

This scream was drawn out, filled with agony and pain that could not be properly comprehended. It was a scream that shook listeners to the core. One that was far out of place in a world this colorful, even with its mix of horror and insanity. As if each breath was made to let EVERYONE know how much pain and suffering they were in.

“\$@#%!” Jax swore, leaping away in fright and dropping the fabric. Underneath, the screams continued, and the shape underneath started to flail.

“DON’T WORRY!” Caine quickly recovered, floating back down. “I CAN FIX THIS!” He proclaimed as he snapped his finger.

The screaming still continued.

Raising one edge of his teeth like a brow, the ringleader grabbed the curtain and looked inside. His eyes bulged at what he saw. Caine looked at his fingers in alarm, pointing his hand into the hole and kept snapping. But the screams continued, no matter how many times the ringleader snapped his fingers.

“WHY?” Caine’s voice shook, snapping his fingers so rapidly that it was a complete blur to everyone’s eyes. “WHY. ISN’T. THIS. **WORKING?**!” Panic laced his voice, rapidly snapping his fingers so hard that his hand flew off.

Seeing Caine act like this had made the pit in Ragatha’s stomach grow deeper, worried that something bad, no, **HORRIBLE** had befallen on Pomni. And whatever it was, Caine couldn’t fix it.

“I, UM!” The AI looked at everyone and the distressed flailing form underneath the curtain that was still screaming in agony, growing louder and more pain filled by the second. “I! UH!

*WE'LL BE RIGHT BACK FOLKS!*" With a snap of his fingers from his other hand, Caine disappeared, along with the screaming form of Pomni from under the fabric.

Silence finally filled the room, leaving the five behind to wonder what just happened.

"... THE #\$\_@&?!?" Zooble suddenly screamed. "What The &#^\$%?! What the heck was THAT?!"

"Z-Zooble, calm down. I'm sure that... well, I'm not sure what just happened." Kinger admitted. "I've never seen Caine act like that before."

"No \$@#!" Zooble yelled at the frightened chess piece's face. "And what was that with Pomni?! Why was she screaming like that?!"

"I don't know! I'm not a doctor!"

"We don't NEED doctors, idiot! What we need is some answers!" Zooble screamed, going into a raging fit as Kinger and Gangle tried to calm them down.

Ragatha on the other hand was more focused on Jax.

The rabbit was being... awfully quiet. Too quiet. By now he should have made a snarky reply or a mean quip. But no. Jax was being quiet for once. And it unnerved Ragatha that he wasn't acting his usual self. Making her way through the debris, she reached out towards Jax, worried for him.

"Jax?" Ragatha called out softly, reaching a hand out towards the rabbit. "You okay, buddy?"

"Huh? What?" Jax flinched away from Ragatha's touch, blinking up at her before shaking his head and putting on his usual grin. "Oh, yeah. Peachy. Just... peachy." He picked himself up, brushing the ash off his overalls.

"Jax—"

"Hey, I just remembered I needed to be somewhere! Right now in fact! If anybody needs me, don't bother." With that, the rabbit left, putting his arms behind his head and hummed a tune to himself.

Ragatha watched as he departed, unsure of if Jax was acting his usual self now, or if he was putting up a front. His earlier behavior had been startling, and she wondered what he saw under the curtain. Her eye trailed down to the slit in the fabric, debating if she should look under there.

If whatever had been there, if whatever state POMNI was in when Jax looked, was so bad that his usual snark was gone, Ragatha worried something awful must have happened to the little jester.

"R-Ragatha?" A quiet, sad sounding voice captured the doll's attention, turning to look at Gangle. The ever present tragedy mask that was nearly always present almost looked extra sad and heartbroken, rubbing her ribbon hands together. "Where did he take her?"

"I..." Ragatha took a glance at the cut. "I don't know." She admitted, wondering where *exactly* Caine had taken Pomni. She wasn't sure where Caine had dragged Pomni off, but she was sure that it had to be somewhere that could help the small jester. "B-But I'm sure it'll be fine!" She quickly assured. "Caine can fix anything! He's done it plenty of times before. He's probably fixing Pomni up right now!"

"You think so?" Gangle asked, having a barest hint of hope in her voice.

"Absolutely!" Swinging her arm and putting on the biggest smile, Ragatha hoped it would be enough to ease Gangle's worry. "After all, we've all been through some pretty horrible, traumatic things before in the past, but we've managed to bounce back a-okay! I'm sure Pomni will be back soon, right as rain! Considering if you don't add in the new trauma she might have experienced and how she might try to lock herself in her room... again." She cleared her throat at the last part. "So there's nothing to worry about."

"But... Ragatha." Fat tears fell from the corners of Gangle's eyes. "What if Caine *can't* fix her?"

The question took Ragatha by surprise, needing a moment to process what she just heard. "Whoa-whoa-what?! What are you talking about Gangle? Pomni will be fine. Everything will be fine! Caine can fix her! In a snap!" She snapped her own fingers to emphasize her point, confident that Pomni would be okay and back in action in no time. She was sure of it!

"But why couldn't he earlier?"

And just like that, her confidence took a headlong dive into the floorboards, plunging into the cellar where it joined all the poor unfortunate Abstracts trapped there.

"... w... W-W-W-What do you mean? O-Of course he can. He's done it plenty, THOUSANDS of times before. W-W-why would it be different now?"

"Because," Gangle let out a sniffle, more tears falling from her face and her voice even shakier and heart broken as she spoke. "When Caine tried to heal Pomni, he couldn't." Gangle tried to wipe the tears from her eyes, but they kept coming. "A-a-an-an-and that's *never* happened before." She managed to choke out, very near on the edge of a crying fit. "H-h-how can we be s-s-sure he'll f-f-fix her, i-i-if even... if even h-h-he wasn't a-a-able to the f-f-first time?"

The living ribbon looked at Ragatha for an answer, but the ragdoll had gone silent.

She tried to stay positive, imagining Caine returning with Pomni in mere minutes, shaking and possibly likely dissociating from the stress but good as new. She could imagine the relief that she and maybe some of the others would feel seeing Pomni again, to see they were worried over nothing and everything would be back to somewhat normal. Caine would probably give everyone a reward to help smooth things over and then they'd all go back to performing the next day.

That's what she expected.

That's what she hoped for.

But Gangle's question had opened a floodgate of other, darker thoughts that she tried hard not to think about.

And it hurt because, in a way, Gangle was right.

Caine had never failed at fixing them before. He couldn't do much for the Abstracts once they lost their mind, but he could repair the glitches and destruction they caused on others and objects. All he had to do was snap his finger and everything would be fine. No glitches. No damage.

He healed her and Pomni after Kaufmo went insane and became Abstracted, it should have been simple enough for him to heal whatever damage Pomni was in after this stunt.

And it made her stomach twist in a sickening way when she regrettably admitted to the truth when she thought it over.

If Caine could easily fix them with a snap before, why hadn't it worked now?

~\*~

Hours ticked by, morphing into night.

Night then turned to day.

Day turned to night.

Then the night went to sleep and the day took over.

And there was still no sign of Caine or Pomni anywhere.

It was starting to get slightly worrying when neither of them returned. Especially as the days passed and Caine never appeared to start a new crazy adventure for them, or any sign of Pomni in her room or her usual hiding spots. Everyone had looked. They all searched when the first day passed and there was no sign of the two.

Every hiding spot Pomni found when she first arrived was empty. Her room was also unoccupied when they checked there as well.

It was starting to get very worrying when the next day rolled by and there was still no sign of the pair anywhere in The Tent. They extended their search to The Grounds, looking everywhere from the Digital Lake to the Digital Carnival.

With no Caine or Pomni in sight, things were... odd.

There wasn't a day that went by when they wished they could take a day off from the crazy AI's wacky personality and all his terrifying and painful stunts. Kinger was certainly happy that he wasn't being forced into any traumatic adventures. But it was worrying that Pomni was nowhere to be found ever since the accident.

Most of them figured that Caine was still focusing on Pomni, trying to fix her after the incident, though that left them wondering why it was taking so long.

Ragatha was worried. It shouldn't be taking Caine this long to heal someone. They should have been back by now. What was taking them so long?

"You're worrying over nothing."

"It's not nothing, Zooble. This is serious." Ragatha paced back and forth, holding her cheek in one hand as she walked. "It's never taken Caine this long to heal someone. Even serious injuries from Abstracts are usually gone in a snap, so why is this time different?"

"I don't know. You're probably over-thinking things, dollface. Aren't you supposed to be more optimistic than this?" Jax teasingly asked, reclined in a hammock he strung up. Out of everyone, Jax was the only one who didn't look or aid in the search for Pomni. Ever since the incident, the rabbit had taken a back seat, staying mostly in his room or walking around The Tent with no real worry or care.

"Jax, this is serious!" Ragatha glared at him. "Pomni should have been okay the moment Caine snapped his fingers, and it's been days since we've seen either of them! Something bad must have happened."

"And you're concerned why?" Kicking his feet up, Jax closed his eyes, sinking comfortably into his hammock. "Listen Rags, you should relax, kick your feet up and enjoy the time off. Opportunities to unwind are hard to find in a place like this."

Ragatha's face twisted in fury, marching straight over to the rabbit and grabbed hold of his hammock. Giving it a hard yank, she sent the hammock spinning with Jax inside. The hammock spun under till it was completely twisted, with Jax's limbs sticking out in various places with his eyes in the middle, blinking a few times before the hammock spun again, this time dumping Jax to the ground.

"Ow! Hey!" He glared up at the ragdoll, rubbing his head in pain.

"How can you be so calm about this?" Ragatha put her hands to her hips, glaring down at Jax. "Pomni and Caine have been gone for days! Aren't you even a little worried?"

"Why should I be?" Jax picked himself off the ground. "There's not much any of us can do. Caine's the only one who can fix anyone. You know from first hand experience."

"But it's never taken him DAYS to heal someone!" Ragatha pointed out as the rabbit dusted himself. "It has to be serious!"

"Or maybe it isn't and you're just overreacting."

"Overreacting?! Jax, Pomni could be in a serious state right now. If Caine couldn't fix whatever's wrong the first time, then this might be more serious than we thought!"

"I hate to admit it, but she's right." Zooble added their two cents. "We heal quick, but that doesn't mean we still can't get hurt. Not by normal ways, but still. I mean, you probably saw

how bad it was, didn't you?"

Their comment made Jax freeze up. The rabbit went awfully silent for a while before going back to brush off imaginary dust.

"... Jax, please. How bad—"

"I don't want to talk about it." The rabbit quickly cut Ragatha off, crossing his arms and looking away.

"Jax—"

"Listen, dollface. Just drop it, okay? Caine's probably just hitting a few snags with fixing Pomni. I'm sure she'll be alright under his care, so don't worry about it."

Ragatha deflated, rubbing her arm to clear away so distress. "But for how long, Jax? It been days—"

"It's only been like two days." Zooble said in the background.

"—Since we've heard or seen any sight of Caine or Pomni. I don't know if I should be worried, I mean, I know Caine's capable of doing basically anything but if he can't then how is he going to help Pomni? And what if he can't help her? What if it's too late? What if—"

Jax shoved his hand into Ragatha's face, covering her mouth with his hand. "Shh. You hear that?" He asked. She and Zooble looked around in confusion, wondering what he heard. "That's the sound... of you shutting up." He grinned at her as he took away his hand, walking away as Ragatha sputtered.

"JAX!"

"Let it go, Ragatha. He's not going to be any help." Zooble held the doll back before she could follow after Jax and yelled at him more. "You know he'll never be any help to anyone."

"But he should care more! It's been *days*—"

"Literally only two."

"—And there's no sign of either of them anywhere! They're not in The Tent, or the Digital Lake, or carnival, or anywhere on The Grounds!"

"Why do you want to find them so badly?"

"I just! ... I want to help. Somehow."

"We can't help. You heard what Jax said, Caine's the only one with the capability to fix anyone in this place. How would you be any help?"

"I could at least try to help instead of lazing around all day." Ragatha shot a small glare at the corner Jax had disappeared behind. "He won't even tell me how bad it was, no matter how

hard I try to get him to open up.”

“Maybe he doesn’t want to talk about it because it wasn’t a pretty sight.” Zooble pointed out. “And I’m no psychiatrist, but I’m pretty sure no one wants to talk about the \$!# they’ve seen willingly.”

“And that’s why I’m worried about the state that Pomni’s in.” Ragatha sighed. “If it was bad enough to get Jax’s to shut up and not even joke about it, then she’s probably in a terrible state.”

“I’m not so sure about that. I’m pretty sure she’ll be fine.”

“Fine? Have you not seen the state of the stage?” The doll pointed at the main showing area, which was still in great disrepair from the accident. No one had gone near it since that day, too afraid to touch it and relive memories of the incident that was still very fresh on all their minds. “Stuff like this is usually repaired before the next day, even without Caine doing anything. And yet, it’s still ruined.”

“Okay, you might have a point on that, I’ll give you that. But you seriously think Caine won’t be able to help Pomni?”

“No, I… I know Caine’s capable, very capable, when he’s not being too eccentric or glitching out or distracted or you know, b-but after what happened here and after Pomni…” She trailed off. She and Zooble directed their eyes to somewhere else, uncomfortable to talk about… that. The memory still kept some of them up at night. “I just want to know if Pomni’s going to be okay.”

“Eh. I’m sure she’ll be.” Zooble gave a half-hearten shrug. “But, maybe you should relax a little. Jax wasn’t lying about getting opportunities to get away from Caine and his %#^@ up adventures. Takes some time to unwind and not get worked up over whatever state Pomni may be in. You definitely need it.”

“Aw, Zooble,” Ragatha was touched by the mix-and-match being’s suggestion. They were normally very friendly, but they did make a good point. “I didn’t think you’d care about anybody.”

“I don’t.” Zooble said bluntly. “I just want you to shut up about being worried for Pomni already.”

“Oh.” Ragatha’s smile dropped. “Well, I still count it as caring in your own blunt and… rude way.” She smiled nervously. “But, you’re probably right. With Caine gone for now, maybe we should take the opportunity to relax a bit.” The idea of not having to be forced into an adventure or doing any stunts for the show was very tantalizing to the pair. Free time without having to do anything wacky with no Caine around to stress out their day? It sounded like paradise.

“Exactly. No Caine, no worries.”

Ragatha let out an uneasy laugh, shaking her head. "Right. No Caine... no worries." Shaking her head again with a deep sigh, she put on an easy smile as she looked at Zooble. "You want to hit the fairgrounds?"

"Hm... eh, why not?" Zooble shrugged. "I could go for some games that don't involve inflicting harm right now."

"Then let's go." Ragatha smiled, but inwardly she still worried for Pomni as they headed off for the Digital Carnival. Her thoughts kept drifting back to the small jester, wondering if she would be okay in Caine's care.

The AI was a nice guy... when he wasn't actively trying to turn someone into a living pincushion. He was wacky and some of his methods were a bit... questionable, but all around, Caine was a decent guy for an AI.

He did care, in his own way, and he was trying his best. It wasn't always the best, but he was trying. And he would try for Pomni. He wouldn't just abandon anyone who was in pain. He always fixed anyone who was glitching out from coming into contact with an Abstracted person. He fixed Ragatha plenty of times when she tried to reason or calm down any recently turned Abstracted beings.

Reasoning... never worked, but points for trying!

And despite locking them all up so they could hurt or destroy the whole Tent, Caine was still nice to the Abstractions. Ragatha knew this because she once asked Caine what he planned to do with them.

The AI didn't know, but he did assure Ragatha that no harm would come to them in the cellar. It was designed to hold Abstracts after the first person trapped finally lost their mind, so it would hold all of them until something could be done to help them and turn them back to normal.

As Ragatha reasoned with her worries, she and Zooble entered the Digital Carnival area. Games, coasters, and a large assortment of booths selling food surrounded the pair as they entered, passing by mannequins who filled in the space around them, running booths or playing games or enjoying the rides.

"Huh. It's actually been a while since I've been here." Zooble commented as they looked around. "One that wasn't an adventure at least."

"Yeah. We've hardly left The Tent for anything besides adventures." Ragatha agreed, taking a look around. Everything seemed to be okay, and the games did look kind of fun. A smile crept up on her face, gazing at the booths with different games and prizes displayed in them. Her one eye landed on a plush cow, one with large chubby cheeks and stubby little legs.

An overwhelming sensation of glee washed over the doll, and she quickly rushed over to the booth.

“Annnd there she goes.” Zooble scoffed, continuing to walk and making their way towards the nearest shooting gallery for their own bit of fun.

The pair quickly indulged themselves in games, enjoying the festivities without the stress of adventure hanging over their heads. They played separately, or sometimes playing at the same booth, often against each other or teaming up against another team. They had plenty of fun, though admittedly Ragatha had to hold Zooble back when they got angry over a rigged game and tried to attack the mannequin managing the booth a few times.

Still, the pair were enjoying themselves. From taking rides on the ferris wheel or winning prizes from the games. They even enjoyed some of the food that was being sold there.

Ragatha was having so much fun, she completely forgot all about Pomni until Zooble brought it up.

“So, still worried about Pomni?” The ragdoll blinked up in surprise, not having expected Zooble to bring it up.

Ragatha looked down at the cotton candy in her hand, staring at the sweet confection. “... a little.” She admitted after a while. “But not as much as before. I think being at the carnival soothed most of my worries.”

“Thank god.” Zooble huffed. They were quiet for a moment before looking up at the sky. “... I wonder how the others are doing.”

“What?”

“The whole Pomni situation.” Zooble calcified, turning their focus on Ragatha. “I know Jax doesn’t care and you care too much... but, how are Kinger and Gangle taking it? I haven’t seen them around since that day.”

“Oh, well they’re fine. Fine as they can be.” Ragatha chuckled nervously, tearing off some of the candy. “I checked up on Kinger at least twice and he seems to be doing pretty well for the most part. Still hiding inside his impenetrable fortress but at least I was able to talk with him a bit. I... didn’t want to worry him about Pomni or anything so I let him be. Gangle on the other hand was a bit more tricky. She hasn’t put on her comedy mask and...” Shaking her head with a sigh. “I can understand that she’s not okay with everything, but we’re all handling it in our own way!”

“Hmph.” Zooble shook their head. “As well as we can...” They tapped their hand on the table they were sitting at, glancing at the small pile of prizes they both managed to win. Grabbing one of the plush toys, they looked at it, studying the details and occasionally plucking at it.

“... is... Is something on your mind, Zooble?” Ragatha asked after a tense moment.

“Hm?” The mix-and-match being looked up briefly, blinking their eyes slowly at the doll before putting their gaze back on the prize. They fiddled with it some more before finally speaking. “... I... the thing you said. Back earlier with Jax.”

Lowering her treat down, Ragatha sensed that there was something deep in Zooble's mind.  
"Yes?"

"About Caine taking too long to fix Pomni?" Ragatha flinched, recalling her earlier discussion from today. "I've been thinking." Zooble continued. "What if... what if you're right? What if it is more serious than we all thought?" They held up the toy, looking at it with some hint of sadness and fear. "We can't die in the digital world. Plenty of others tried ending their existence when they realized that they couldn't leave. &#^%@, even you and me tried at one point."

"I try not to think about that." Ragatha admitted with a hint of shame. She was not proud of herself during her lowest points, and didn't want to fall that low ever again. Not unless she wanted to end up turning Abstracted.

"My point is... maybe you're right about being worried." Zooble continued, setting the toy down. "Caine's never taken long to heal or fix us. Even from damage from Abstraction encounters. I really don't want to worry about it but..." They went silent for a long moment.

"... But what?"

"Nothing." Zooble shook their head, sighing. "Look, just... forget about what I said. I don't want to think about it so let's drop it, alright?"

Ragatha didn't want to drop it. She wanted to know what Zooble was thinking and what they were going to say. But she knew there was no point in trying. Zooble clearly didn't want to talk about it and she wasn't going to force them to speak if they didn't want to.

Glancing at the prizes, she reached over and grabbed one, eyeing it before smiling. "I think I'll give one of my prizes to Pomni. Give her a little something to show that I'm glad that she's alright when she gets back."

"*If she gets back.*"

"What?"

"Nothing!" Zooble quickly darted their eyes away. "Nothing." They looked over at the pile, narrowing their eyes at the assortment of colorful toys. "God, why did I even get this stuff? They're all atrocious!" They reached over, pushing the toy pile over to Ragatha's side. "You can give this Pomni. I don't want this junk in my room."

"Oh! Uh, okay." Ragatha played along, secretly glad that Zooble was showing a nicer side to them and showing that they did care about Pomni. Looking at the sky, she could see stars start to come out on the darkening sky. Caine didn't understand normal night and day cycles, so he let the sun and the moon decide when to take over if no one chose which setting they wanted when they left The Tent. "It's getting late. What to head back?"

"Eh." Zooble shrugged, getting up as Ragatha finished her treat and gathered up all the prizes in her arms. They walked in relative silence as they made their way back to The Tent, neither

speaking to the other for a long time till they were halfway there. “Do you think Pomni’s going to try and hide in her room again?”

“When she gets back? Probably.” Ragatha admitted, knowing how shy and shaken Pomni could be after some of the more intense shows were done. “She’ll probably try to hide under her bed or in one of the cupboards again. But I’m sure she’ll like the gifts.”

“They’re not really gifts. I’m just dumping them on Pomni because I don’t want all this junk messing up my room.”

“Well, it’s the thought that counts.” Ragatha tried to stay positive, looking at each toy in her arms. Most of them were soft and plush, with cute designs that were adorable to the ragdoll’s one eye. But others were... questionable, at best. Ragatha was sure she needed to sort out the ones Pomni wouldn’t freak out over and keep the rest to keep Pomni from stressing out.

“Speak for yourself.”

“Anyway, thank you for the day out, Zooble. I really needed some distraction from... everything.”

“As long as you don’t go crazy, I don’t really care.”

Ragatha chuckled, thinking that Zooble had more care to their character than they let on, but her mirth died when they almost reached The Tent and Kinger came running out the entrance. “Kinger?”

“OH THANK GOODNESS I FOUND YOU BOTH!” He shouted when he spotted the pair, going up to them quickly.

“Whoa, whoa! Kinger, what’s going on?”

“It’s Caine! He came back!” The pair froze in shock at the news. Caine came back? The wacky AI returned?

“He came—? Wait, what?!?” Dropping the toys in shock, Ragatha grabbed Kinger, forcing him to look at her. “When? Where?! Is Pomni back?! Is she alright?!?”

“I don’t know! Caine appeared a few hours ago. At first I thought Pomni was back too, but when we tried to ask him, he asked us if anyone was a doctor.”

“What?” Zooble said in shock.

“Why would he need a doctor?” Ragatha asked, her panic growing at this new information.

“I don’t know. None of us could ask him. He was glitching out too much to get a coherent answer.”

Zooble and Ragatha looked at each other in surprise. Caine was prone to glitches and such, but it was always for a short while.

“He kept asking over and over for a doctor, if any of us were a doctor.”

“But none of us are doctors!” Zooble pointed out.

“Really?” Kinger blinked in surprise. “Huh. That’s weird. Why did Jax claim to be one then?”

“WHAT?!?” The pair shouted, startling the chess piece more.

“Jax did what?!?” Ragatha asked.

“He’s not a doctor! He doesn’t even have a medical license!”

“Caine should know that!”

“I don’t think he did!” Kinger exclaimed, ducking his head down into his robe. “He just took Jax when he said he was a doctor and just... disappeared!”

“When was this? How long ago did this happen?” Ragatha asked, her previous worry for the small jester coming back tenfold. If Caine was asking if any of them were doctors...

“I-I-I don’t know! Maybe a few hours ago! Gangle suggested telling you and—oop!” Kinger fell to the ground as Ragatha let go, rushing inside The Tent with Zooble right behind her.

The pair raced inside, looking around for the ringleader and rabbit. “Jax?! Caine!” Ragatha called out, looking about the main area.

There was no sign of the pair anywhere on the lower grounds.

“R-Ragatha?” A timid voice made them look, finding Gangle peering down at them.

“Gangle, where’s Caine?”

“What’s going on?” Zooble asked at the same time. “We heard that Caine was asking something about a doctor.”

“I-I don’t know.” Gangle sniffled. “B-but I think I saw him and Jax enter the sleeping quarters just a few moments ago. A-and I think,” She let out a quiet sniff. “I think I-I might have seen Pomni w-with them too.”

The pair’s eyes widened. Caine was already back? With Jax and Pomni?

The pair didn’t waste any time running up the stairs to second level, rushing past a distressed Gangle and to the entrance of the sleeping area where every performer went to get some rest.

“Caine!” Ragatha shouted, spying both him and Jax by one of the doors.

“AH! RAGATHA AND ZOOBLE!” Caine turned his focus on the pair as they came to a stop. “NICE TO SEE YOU BOTH ARE DOING A-OKAY!”

“W-Where...” Ragatha gasped, getting her breathing under control. “Hoo, w-where’s Pomni? Is she alright?” She looked between the pair, spying no sign of the red and blue jester anywhere. “Where is she?”

“In her room.” Jax pointed his thumb at the door. “Taking a nap.”

“*A nap?*” Zooble asked, a hint of outrage seeping into their voice as they spoke. “Everyone’s been worried about her being gone and she’s in her room napping?!?”

“I ASSURE YOU, POMNI IS DOING FINE.” Caine addressed Ragatha’s question. “SHE JUST EH... NEEDS SOME TIME TO REST FOR... A WHILE?”

Ragatha looked carefully at Caine. He didn’t look to be glitching and his personality was still the same. Yet there was hesitation in his voice, like he was struggling to find the right words to speak. “Can we see her?” She asked, walking towards the door and reaching for the door handle.

Before she could even touch it, Jax’s hand came down on her wrist. “I don’t think so, dollface.”

“Wha-?”

“JAX IS RIGHT! POMNI’S HAD A BIT OF A ROUGH DAY, SO FOR NOW SHE’LL BE CONFINED TO HER ROOM FOR THE TIME BEING.”

“What?” Ragatha looked at the AI in shock. “You’re locking her in her room? Wh-why would you do that?”

“IT WAS JAX’S SUGGESTION.” The ringleader motioned with his cane to the rabbit. “BUT DON’T WORRY! POMNI WILL BE IN GREAT HANDS! I FILLED HER ROOM WITH ALL SORTS OF FUN THINGS TO KEEP HER ENTERTAINED!”

“So everything’s alright now?” Zooble spoke up, crossing their arms with a board look back on their face. “Pomni’s fine and there’s nothing to worry about?”

Caine started to say something, but suddenly froze.

“Sure.” Jax shrugged, leaning against the way. “She’s as peachy as she can be.”

“Great.” Rolling their eyes, Zooble turned and went straight for their room. “If anyone needs me, the %\$&# off.” They flipped the bird at the trio, which of course was covered by a censor bar and quickly ducked into their room, slamming the door behind them.</p></div><div data-bbox="102 816 880 855" data-label="Text"><p>“... So,” Ragatha tapped her fingers together, turning her focus on Caine. “You were able to fix Pomni. That’s great! So everything’s back to normal?”</p></div><div data-bbox="102 870 508 889" data-label="Text"><p>“WELLLL... YES.” Caine started. “BUT NO.”</p></div><div data-bbox="102 904 836 943" data-label="Text"><p>“What? W-what do you mean?” She looked between the pair, feeling her ebbing worry return. “What’s wrong with Pomni?”</p></div>

“NOTHING MY DEAR! IT’S JUST THAT I WAS ABLE TO FIX HER! BUT UH, NOT COMPLETELY?”

“What?”

“Don’t worry about it. Pomni’s going to be fine.” Jax examined his fingers. “I told you there was nothing to worry about.”

“There’s always something to worry about if you’re involved, Jax.” Ragatha turned her focus on the rabbit. “Kinger told me how you tricked Caine into believing you were a doctor—”

“WHAT?!?” Caine’s eyes bulged, looking at Jax in shock. “YOU’RE NOT A DOCTOR?!”

“Of course I am! I have the proof right here.” Jax pulled out a sheet of paper, holding it out for the pair to see.

On the paper was a poorly drawn medical degree, that was written all in crayon. Most of the lines were squiggles and there were cartoon drawings scattered about, along with a small drawing of Jax smiling and winking with stars all around him. At the top of the paper, the words A TOTALLY REAL MEDICAL DEGREE was drawn in different colors, along with a thumbs up encased in a circle at the bottom of the paper.

“WOW! I DIDN’T KNOW WE HAD A REAL DOCTOR IN OUR MISTS!” Caine said with cheer, completely oblivious to the degree’s lack of legitimacy. “IT’S GOOD TO KNOW THAT WE CAN RELY ON SOMEONE FOR MEDICAL TREATMENT!”

Ragatha could only stare dumbfounded at Caine, wondering if the AI was really fooled by the poor and obviously fake ‘degree’ Jax provided.

“ANYWAY, I’LL BE LEAVING POMNI IN JAX’S CARE FOR THE TIME BEING.”

“Wait wait wait. You-You said that she was okay!” Ragatha pointed an accusing finger at Jax. “You said that she was fine!”

“She is.” Jax flooded the paper, tucking it away. “She just needs a few days to recover, that’s all. And since I’ll be looking after her, that means I won’t be able to go on any adventures for the time being.”

“*What?!*” Ragatha exclaimed, finally realizing what was going on. “You’re only doing it so you won’t be dragged into any adventures!” She pointed an accusing finger at Jax’s face.

“So what? Pomni’s health is more important right now, isn’t it?” The rabbit shrugged, pushing the finger away and having that god-awful smirk on his face.

“You—!”

“NOW NOW MY DEAR! NO NEED TO BE UPSET!” Caine got between them before any fighting could break out. “EVERYTHING WILL BE A-OKAY! POMNI’S IN GOOD HANDS!”

“You can’t leave Pomni in! In! In *his* care!” Ragatha pointed at Jax again. “He’s just using this as an excuse to—”

“I’m sorry, who here has the medical license again? Oh wait, that’s right. Me.” Jax pointed to himself as a bunch of colorful flashing signs popped out of nowhere and pointed at him.

“But you’re *not* a doctor!”

“Sheesh, don’t be so tense, Rags. Has the lack of adventures made you stir crazy or something?”

“GASP! IT HAS?!?” Caine gasped in horror, disappearing and reappearing beside Ragatha.

“WE NEED TO GET THAT FIXED *PRONTO!* AND I HAVE JUST THE PERFECT ADVENTURE IN MIND!”

“Wait! No! Caine! I—!” Was all Ragatha could get out before Caine grabbed her arm and teleported them both away, leaving Jax standing in the hallway.

The rabbit’s grin slowly faded, glancing down each end of the hallway. Once he was sure no one was showing up, he quickly turned to Pomni’s door, opening it enough to slip his body inside, taking one last look into the hallway, and closed the door behind him.

Once the door was locked, Jax let out a long drawn out sigh, dragging a hand down his face as he pressed his back against the wood. “Hoo boy.” He sighed quietly.

Ragatha was certainly going to chew him out when she got back from Caine’s adventure, and he did not want to deal with her nagging. Pushing off the door, Jax went over to one of the small tables in the room. Most of the items in here were accommodated to the small jester’s size, which meant Jax needed to bend down to reach a few things.

Grabbing a small rag, he dunked it into a bucket filled with icy cold water, shivering as the cold touched his skin. “Well, looks like I’m bunking in your room tonight.” Making sure the rag was nice and wet, he pulled the cloth out, ringing out the excess water back into the bucket. “You don’t mind if I stay here for a while, do ya kid?”

There was no reply.

He knew there wouldn’t be, yet it somehow didn’t sit right with him that no answer came from the room’s other occupant.

Jax gazed over at the bed, staring at the still figure laid out on the mattress. “... right, thanks.” He looked back down at the rag in his hands, folding it into a rectangle and stepping closer to the bed. “Ragatha was just here by the way.” He continued to speak, reaching over with one hand and grabbing something. “She’s been really worried about you these last few days...” His ears drooped, tossing a different rag that was dry back over to the table with the bucket. “... A lot of them were worried about you.” He added in a soft tone, putting the wet rag on Pomni’s forehead.

There was a small flinch when the rag touched the jester's head, but there was no other movement besides that. Jax studied the smaller being for a moment before sighing, grabbing one of the chairs and taking a seat next to the bed.

"... You better wake up soon, you hear me?" He muttered, leaning his chin in one hand and reaching with the other to touch the bandages wrapped around almost all of Pomni's face.

## Chapter 3

The return of Caine was... not well received.

Kinger had not been too happy when the AI returned, hiding himself in his ‘impenetrable fortress’ at any chance he got. Caine of course didn’t understand why Kinger was trying to hide, and sent him on an adventure to get over his anxiety and... well, let’s just say that it didn’t help much.

Most of the crew was in distress being thrown back into these adventures, wishing that they could have a longer vacation from these wacky stunts and shows he put on. Some tried to voice this to Caine, but as usual, it went over the AI’s head.

The only ones not thrown back into the adventures or being put on display of torment were Jax and Pomni.

Caine had given a vague reason as to why Pomni wasn’t joining in and told everyone not to worry about it. Jax on the other hand was given free permission to not join in on the adventures because Caine had assigned him to watch over Pomni. All because he claimed to be a ‘doctor’.

This caused a bit of an uproar to the rest of the crew, who knew full well that Jax was in fact **not** a doctor and voiced all their complaints about the rabbit was just using this as a way to get off scot-free from these insane adventures. All of them were sure he was just using Pomni as a way out. Ragatha was especially sure of this.

“JAX! Jax I know you’re in there!” The doll pounded her fist against the door. Not the door belonging to Jax’s room, but Pomni’s. The rabbit had been staying in Pomni’s room since Caine brought her back, and had been staying inside the small jester’s room ever since.  
“Open this door this instant!”

“I don’t think that’s going to work, Ragatha.” Kinger pointed hesitantly, keeping a far distance with Gangle. It was never a good idea to make Ragatha angry. Even optimistic people had their limits and Ragatha certainly had hers. “He hasn’t come out since... well, since Caine came back.”

“I know that! And I know he’s just using Pomni as an excuse not to be on stage!” Ragatha stomped her foot, glaring at the door.

“Jeez, calm down will ya? Why are you getting all worked up about this?” Zooble asked. “I get that you’re angry that he’s not getting thrown into these adventures like the rest of us, but why get so worked up about this? It’s usually my thing.”

Ragatha let out a long sigh, sagging her shoulders as she turned to Zooble. “I know. And, truth be told, I’m not angry about him not being thrown into adventures or put into stunts like the rest of us. I’m mad because Jax won’t let me see Pomni.” She tossed a glare at the door.  
“I tried to visit when Caine brought her back, but Jax won’t let me in!”

"Have you tried asking?" Gangle asked in her quiet voice. Kinger let out a startled yell when he looked at her.

"I've tried." Ragatha admitted with a sigh. "I've tried talking, asking, demanding, everything! And he STILL WON'T OPEN THE DOOR!" She yelled at the door. She glared at it for a long moment before letting out a sigh and pushed back some of her hair. "It's almost been a week and he won't let me in." She turned to Zooble. "Maybe you can try? You both are around the same age."

"Not a chance." Zooble shook their head, not wanting any involvement with the rabbit. "And I'm at least six months older than him. I doubt he'll listen to any of us."

"That's true." Ragatha sighed, glancing at the door before shaking her head. "Well, he'll have to come out eventually. He can't stay in there the *whole* time."

"Well actually he could!" Kinger spoke up. "Since our digital bodies don't require any nutrition or other bodily needs, Jax's could stay locked up in Pomni's room for ages without needing to leave at all."

"Way to ruin that plan, genius." Zooble said with their dead tone snark as Ragatha frowned at him.

"... Ruin the what?" Kinger blinked, eyes going out of focus.

Shaking her head, Ragatha stormed away from the door, needing some time to relax before Caine's next show. The others sensed that there was nothing for them there to do, so they quickly parted, going about their business before Caine could summon them for another performance or adventure.

After a while, the door to Pomni's room opened a crack.

Jax peeked his head out, looking out into the hallway. Seeing it was empty of the other performers, he took a step out the room, holding an empty bucket in one hand. Once he was out the room, he closed the door, locking it so no one would be able to get inside. He wasn't sure how the others would take it if they saw Pomni's state, even if he didn't truly want to be stuck watching over her the whole time.

He was glad to not be a part of any adventures or performances, but it was BORING watching over Pomni, who wasn't even awake! He thought he could handle watching over her when Caine assigned him to this task, but there was literally nothing for him to do! He couldn't tease her or have any sort of fun with someone who wasn't even conscious! He almost wished that he tricked Caine into assigning someone else to watch after Pomni...

Shaking his head, he went to the end of the hall, making sure no one was watching him as he turned the corner, counting in his head as he passed doors. The back hall of the sleeping quarters lead out into hallways, doors lining each side. These doors weren't occupied or crafted into rooms, so what was behind them was always a mystery.

“Twenty three... twenty four...” Jax slowly counted as he passed each door, doing a mental check of which number he was looking for as he did. “Annnd door number twenty six.” He came to a stop between a pair of doors. “Now...” He looked at the doors on either side. “Which one was it again?”

Counting doors was easy. Remembering which side the specific door he was looking for wasn’t. Jax had years of exploring this digital world, yet he could never quite remember which door to go into. It was always a fifty-fifty chance he was stuck in.

“Let’s see. Eeny, meeny, miny, moe, put a smile on for all Caine’s shows. If Kinger hollers, hey who knows, at least he’s not dangling by his toes.” His hand stopped on the door to his left, walking over to it and throwing it open. His face crumbled into a frown when he saw that the inside was covered in clocks, all ranging from various looks, designs, time, and some appeared to be broken.

A loud **BRRRRRANG!** reverberated in the room, shaking Jax to his core and making his ears ring. Slamming the door shut, he let out a pained groan, rubbing his head as the ringing cleared from his ears. “Never rely on Kinger for anything.” He muttered, going to the door on the right and opened it.

Inside this door was a large water garden, filled with plants and flora, along with several ponds and small lakes filled with colorful fish. Birds sat in the branches of tree tops above, while cranes and strokes scoured the water for food below. In the center of the garden in a large body of water, a fountain with an odd looking statue sat peacefully among the tranquility.

Jax didn’t take his eyes off the statue, slowly going over to the nearest small pond and scooped up some water into the bucket. His eyes remained glued on the statue as he slowly backed out, grabbing the door handle with his free hand and closed it.

The door didn’t remain shut for long though. It opened up just enough for Jax to stick his upper body back into the room, reaching down and grabbing a stone from the ground. He tossed it a few times in the air before reeling his arm back and chucking the stone at the statue, quickly leaving before the sailing projectile collided with the art piece, and shut the door behind him as an angry roar screamed out.

Chuckling to himself, Jax reached for the bucket.

“JAX!”

Startled, Jax flailed a bit before relaxing, sighing as he looked up at Caine in mild irritation.

“THERE YOU ARE MY BOY! I WAS LOOKING ALL OVER THE PLACE FOR YOU!”

“Oh yeah? What for?”

“WELL, NOT TO BE RUDE OR PESTERING SINCE YOU’RE DOING SUCH A SPIFFY JOB OF WATCHING OVER POMNI, BUT UM, HAS THERE BEEN ANY...” The AI tapped his fingers together, looking at Jax hopefully. “PROGRESS? ANY SIGNS OF

IMPROVEMENT? WAKING UP? SCREAMING? AGONY? DEATH? DISEASE? PAIN?  
BURNING? BURNING? BURNING?! ITBURNSITBURNSITBURNSITBURN–!  
CHOCOLATE PUDDING?”

“No thanks.” Jax declined the treat Caine sporadically pulled out, a little worried about the glitch near the end but decided not to bring that to attention. *It almost sounded like Pom–* “And there hasn’t been any changes. Pomni’s still unconscious. Which is better than the alternative.” Grabbing the bucket, he lifted to look inside. “Say, can you be a pal and maybe put a few ice cubes in here? The last batch kinda melted.”

“MELTED? THAT SHOULDN’T HAVE HAPPENED.” Caine looked surprised. “I KNOW I DON’T HAVE A FULL GRASP OF TEMPERATURES, BUT I’M PRETTY SURE THE ICE HERE SHOULDN’T BE MELTING.”

“Yeah, well, they did. So?” Jax held the bucket up, giving it a little shake. Caine snapped his fingers, summoning buckets of ice. Too many buckets of ice. The whole hall was filled with buckets containing ice in them. An iceberg somehow was squeezed into the mix, with a family of penguins wadding across it. “... uh–”

“WHOOPSIE DODEL!” Snapping his fingers again, the buckets of ice, and the iceberg, disappeared, save for two that floated in the air. “THERE YOU GO!” Jax grabbed the buckets, satisfied that he didn’t need to venture further out as he thought he would.

“Thanks.” With a bucket full of water, and two filled with ice, Jax was certain he wouldn’t need to leave Pomni’s room for a while now. “So, how’s the stage doing? Still in that ruined state?”

“UNFORTUNATELY SO.” Caine said, floating after Jax as the rabbit made his way back. “WHICH IS A SLIGHT PROBLEM. SHOWS FROM PERFORMANCES ARE USUALLY ON STAGES AND THE MAIN ONE IS STILL UNDERGOING SOME DEEP REPAIRS, SO WE STILL NEED TO GO WITH SUBSTITUTES FOR THE TIME BEING.”

“Can’t you just... you know?” Sliding the bucket’s handle down to his elbow, Jax snapped his fingers.

“I...” Caine started, but froze up. Jax stared at the floating AI, waiting for him to boot up. When a few seconds went by without anything happening, Jax reached over and patted Caine’s lower jaw... face... thing. “CAN’T.” The AI said finally, shaking his head and looked down at his hands in worry. “IT’S... IT’S JUST LIKE WITH... NONE OF IT IS WORKING.” There was a hint of fear in the AI’s voice, and Jax knew he had to distract Caine before he started spazzing out.

“So what adventures have our friends gotten into? Anything interesting that I’m missing out on?” He quickly asked, not really interested to know, but he didn’t want to deal with a glitched out Caine. Plus, he might as well know all about the fun he missed out on. All the pranks he could have been making.

“WHAT? OH! YES! ADVENTURES! EVERYONE’S BEEN HAVING A GRAND TIME WITH ALL THE ADVENTURES I’VE SET UP! IT’S A DARN SHAME YOU

COULDN'T BE THERE TO ENJOY THEM!"

Darn shame indeed. He missed out on a lot of mischief making these last couple of days, he'd have to make up for lost time on them when he could.

"BY THE WAY, RAGATHA'S BEEN ASKING ME ABOUT SOMETHING AS OF RECENT."

"Oh yeah?" Jax felt a small bit of irritation sparking inside him. "About what?"

"ABOUT... POMNI." Caine looked away, drumming his fingers on his cane. Jax surpassed a groan as the AI turned his eyes back on him. "SHE'S BEEN ASKING ME TO LET HER SEE OUR FUN LITTLE JESTER, AND WELL... I'M NOT SURE OF WHAT TO TELL HER."

"Tell her to mind her own business." Jax huffed. He did not want anyone seeing Pomni's current state. Especially not Ragatha. She wouldn't... don't think about it. Don't let it get to you. "I got things under control."

"INDEEDY YOU DO! I NEVER KNEW WE HAD A CERTIFIED DOCTOR AMONG OUR SUPERSTARS! WHAT LUCK TO HAVE YOU HERE JAX!"

"Oh totally." Jax tried to hide his smirk, wondering what else he could get away with if he claimed to have other 'professional degrees'. "Anyway, I better get back to watching Pomni. Is there anything else I should know?"

"I'LL LET YOU KNOW IF THERE'S ANYTHING OUT OF THE SORTS. I SHOULD GO AND CHECK ON THE OTHERS TO SEE HOW THEY'RE DOING ON THEY'RE CURRENT ADVENTURE! GOOD LUCK WITH POMNI!"

"Thanks." Jax said, watching as Caine's body shrunk and disappeared. He'd never understand how the AI worked, but at least he was alright enough. Shaking his head, Jax looked at the buckets of ice. Two was probably overkill, but considering how fast he was going through water, this could keep him longer in Pomni's room without needing to head out to grab more.

Unlocking the door, Jax started to wonder if he could leave a few surprises in everyone's beds tonight, but the thought came to a quick stop when his ears picked something up inside. "#\$@%." He swore as he ducked inside and quickly shut the door behind him.

~\*~

The days slowly passed by and things hadn't changed much.

Jax still looked after Pomni while everyone else were sent on adventures. Although, when they thought about it, Caine's adventures seemed to be more... different.

The ringmaster was his usual peppy, eccentric, insane self, but his adventures seemed to lack most of his special touches. They weren't crazy or panned out, and there were hardly any bosses or queens at the end that needed to be defeated. Most of these adventures were

mundane or simple, like finding a specific item or navigating through a hedge maze, with far less dangers to be wary of.

And it was concerning as everyone didn't know if that was a good or bad thing.

At least it was a somewhat relief that the adventures were slightly calmer. They still had their quirks of danger here and there, but most of it was easy to finish.

Had the incident with Pomni affect this somehow?

No one knew. They didn't want to point this out to Caine and have everything revert back to the way things were before.

Though it did get under their skins for a while knowing that Jax wasn't being dragged along into the mix. Zooble had a particularly colorful set of censored words to say after one particularly bad day, and almost broke down Pomni's door if Ragatha hadn't stopped them.

As much as anyone wanted to see how Pomni was doing, breaking down the jester's door was the last thing any of them wanted to do. Ragatha kept trying to convince Jax to open the door, but the rabbit was very stubborn, and kept the door locked up tight so that no one could get in.

Though that didn't do much to stop Caine from teleporting in. Whenever someone asked the ringleader how the newest member was doing, Caine would quickly disappear then reappear moments after checking, assuring everyone that Pomni was doing fine but still needed time to fully recover.

But how long was that going to take?

How long until Pomni shows her face again and things would go back to being before the incident? No one knew for certain, not even Caine. It was pointless to ask the AI. He kept dodging or changing the subject when someone tried to press for answers. So much so that everyone basically gave up.

Everyone except Ragatha that is.

The ragdoll didn't give up so easily. Not after one particular night when she found a little gift Jax left in her bed. She had been furious at first, but then she realized that Jax had left Pomni's room. When exactly she didn't know, but she deduced that it was when everyone was preoccupied by the adventures that he stepped out of the room.

Which gave her an idea.

"Why are we doing this again?"

"Shh!" Ragatha peeked into the hallway. There was still no sign of the rabbit. She moved away, looking at her companions. "Does everyone remember their jobs?"

"Uh, no." Zooble said while Gangle shook her head. "You just dragged us here as soon as Caine teleported away."

“Shouldn’t Kinger be here?” Gangle asked in her usual quiet voice. “We left him behind—”

“Why are we even here?” Zooble grumbled, cutting over Gangle’s words. “What’s the point of standing around doing nothing?”

“It’s not nothing, we’re waiting.”

“For what? For Jax to leave Pomni’s room? Hate to break it to you, but that’s not going to happen.”

“That’s what you think.” Ragatha peeked into the hallway again. “But I know he’s left the room before.”

“You got any proof?”

“He left an ice cube in my bed.” Ragatha hissed, having no fond recollection of a sudden cold chill pressing into her back when she tried to sleep that night. “And I know it wasn’t there that morning. And I’ve seen him leave before.”

“Wait, really?” Zooble asked in surprise. “When did that happen?”

“A few days ago. When I finished the Finding What Doesn’t Belong adventure. I managed to see Jax duck back inside before I could reach him.” Ragatha explained. “I’ve been trying to catch him when he’s out of Pomni’s room so I can go check on her, but it’s been a bit of a struggle. It’s hard to know when he leaves or if he’s going to.”

“So you’ve just been standing out here waiting the whole time?”

“It’s... not the best plan.” Ragatha admitted with a sheepish shrug. “But it’s all I can work with at the moment. And not exactly the whole time. Just a few days in between mostly. But that’s not the point! The point is, Jax *does* leave Pomni’s room, and you’re going to help me.”

“Help you? Why the #@%# would I do that?” Zooble asked angrily, loud enough that Gangle’s quiet voice of why she was even here wasn’t heard.

“Because Caine isn’t going to be any help, and Kinger heeeeaaaaahhh... he’s not really subtle in most cases like this.”

“So you decided to drag me into this? What’s even the point?”

“Oh! Right! I haven’t told you my plan.” Ragatha batted her forehead, then looked at her companions. “Zooble, your job is to keep Jax distracted when he leaves Pomni’s room. Out of everyone here, you’re one of the best at keeping Jax distracted in one spot. While you do that, Gangle and I will try to get into Pomni’s room.”

“Why am *I* being put on distraction duty? Can’t *you* distract him? Or the crybaby? No offense, Gangle.”

“It’s fine.” Gangle let out a tiny sniff.

"I can't because Jax will outright ignore me." Ragatha huffed. "Gangle would be too easy of a target for one of Jax's pranks, and she's needed to unlock Pomni's door."

"M-Me?" Gangle looked up in alarm. "Oh n-no no no. I can't."

"Yes you can Gangle. I've seen you pick locks before."

"Wait, really?" Zooble looked in surprise at the living string. "You? Picking locks?"

"I-I-I-It was only one time. Jax locked me out of my own room." Gangle admitted, digital tears falling from her face. "*And I'm not very good at it.*"

"Ah, so that's why you need a distraction." Zooble nodded their head. "But, seriously, why me? Couldn't you have gotten Kinger for this or done it yourself?"

"As I said earlier, Jax would out right ignore me if I tried to talk to him. And Kinger would probably forget what he's supposed to do five seconds after given the task."

"So that naturally falls on me to distract him." Zooble concluded, letting out a long drawn sigh.

"You're the best at getting Jax's attention." Ragatha said with a half-hearted shrug.

"And what exactly is your role in this? What are you going to do while the rest of us stick our necks out doing this?"

"To find Pomni." Ragatha put on a determined face. "I don't know how she is, or where exactly she'll be in her room. She could be hiding under her bed or curled up in a ball on one of the bookshelves or somewhere. I don't know what state she's in, but I'm pretty good at calming her down, so my job will be to get her out of there."

"Why does this feel more like a rescue mission so suddenly?" Zooble asked as Ragatha peeked into the hallway again.

"The moment Jax steps out of the room and turns the corner, you need to make sure he stays distracted so Gangle will have enough time to unlock the door." Ragatha explained. "Got all that?"

"This is a waste of time." Zooble groaned, slapping their face. "You're not even sure if he's going to come out today."

"W-Well I have a good feeling about today."

"Ragatha, maybe you're too obsessed with this." Zooble sighed, reaching and turning the ragdoll to look at them. "I get that you're worried about Pomni, but Caine says that she's fine. Probably scared and likely traumatized which is nothing new, but fine. Look," They put one of their mismatched hands on Ragatha's shoulder, forcing her to look at them when she tried peeking into the hallway again. "I get that you're worried, and I get that you just want to make sure Pomni's alright, but you're stressing over this to the point of almost obsession. \$&#^, you might drive yourself crazy and Abstract if you keep this up! And that would be a

major problem since you're basically one of the more level-headed people in this crazy place."

"But—"

"You're going overboard with this. And you don't even know if Jax is going to leave Pomni's room! You peeking in every five minutes, and there's no sign of him. He's not going to just magically waltz out just by glancing in—" Zooble tipped their head, gazing inside the hallway. The eyes blew wide, and before either could do anything, Zooble pulled Gangle and Ragatha away from the corner.

"Wha-Zoob—"

"Shh!" Zooble hissed, putting their hands over Ragatha's and Gangle mouths to keep them quiet. Removing their hand from Gangle's mouth, they pulled out one of their eyes from the sockets, quietly creeping back to the entrance of the hallway, and crouched to the ground. Keeping their arm low to the ground, Zooble moved their eye to peek inside.

Down inside the hallway, Jax had his head sticking out the door, looking down either end before moving through the door with a bucket in one hand. He turned and pulled a key out, fiddling with the door for a moment before pocketing the key and heading down the end of the hall, disappearing behind the corner.

"Zooble?"

"He just left the room." Zooble said as they reattached their eye. "Turned a corner at the end of the hall... are you sure we should be doing this?" They asked Ragatha. "I'm not opposing, but did you *really* think this is a good idea?"

"I just want to know if Pomni's alright." Ragatha said with a determined face. "I'm not going to stop feeling that somethings wrong until I see for myself."

Zooble stared at her for a long moment before sighing and rolling their eyes. "If it'll get you to stop worrying so #@&\$ much." They stood to their feet, heading inside. Ragatha was quick to follow after them, motioning Gangle to follow as well.

The trio quickly made their way towards Pomni's door, stopping in front of it once they reached it. A quick check revealed that the door was locked, so Ragatha nodded her head at Gangle. The living ribbon meekly went up to the door, slipping her ribbon hands inside the lock and fiddled them around.

"Think you can distract him long enough?" Ragatha asked Zooble.

"I still think this is a waste of my time." Zooble huffed. "But... it does give me the opportunity to have a few words with that rabbit." They quickly left, turning the corner Jax went down and left the pair to focus on the door.

"I-I'm not sure this is a good idea." Gangle said softly, looking up at Ragatha with worried tear riddled eyes. "What if Caine gets mad at us for doing this? What if we get in trouble?"

“He won’t.” Ragatha assured, patting the living ribbon by the top of her mask. “I don’t think Caine’s capable of getting mad. And we won’t get in trouble. If anything, I’ll just say that it was my idea. I did come up with this plan after all.”

“Is that really a good idea?”

“Don’t worry, everything will be fine.” Ragatha smiled at Gangle, wishing deep down she actually believed her own words.



“This should be good enough for a while.” Jax muttered to himself, setting the bucket filled with water on the ground. Grabbing a rock on the other side, he chucked it at the statue, closing the door just as an angry roar sounded, and chuckled to himself. “Still as funny as the first time.” He snickered, grabbing the bucket and turning to head back.

Only to run right into Zooble, who was glaring at him with their mismatched eyes.

“Gah! Zooble!” Jax flinched back, clutching his chest. “God, don’t scare me like that! You almost gave me a heart attack!”

“Too bad you didn’t.” Zooble scoffed. “Would have made my day.”

“Oh ha ha, very funny. I didn’t know Caine made you the new comedian of the show.” Jax rolled his eyes, moving to step past Zooble. Zooble however blocked his path, staring him down with a hard glare.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you’re up to.”

“And that’s what exactly?” Jax asked, not really caring. He needed to get back to Pomni.

“You’re using this as an excuse not to be dragged into the adventures Caine puts us through.”

“Oh no, how ever did you figure that out?” Jax asked in a mocking tone. “Seriously, you got to take the opportunities presented to you before it gets away, Zooby. Otherwise someone else might just snatch it before you do.”

“I knew it!” Zooble hissed. “I knew there was a reason for you doing this! And everyone else was almost thinking you were doing it because you cared or something.”

“When have I ever cared?” Jax really wished Zooble would hurry along. The longer he was away... although, it *had* been a while since he had any fun messing with someone. “You snooze, you lose. Better luck next time.” He gave them a wink, riling Zooble up further. He could spare a minute or two messing with them.

Just a minute or two. Then he needed to head straight back to Pomni’s room before someone gets there.

Not that they could get in.



"How's it going Gangle? Do you almost have it?" Ragatha asked, keeping an eye on the corner. "No rush or anything, just curious." A nervous laugh escaped her lips, rubbing her hand on her arms and wishing Gangle to go faster.

"I'm trying my best." The mask sniffled. "I told you, I'm not very good at this."

"Just keep trying. I know you can do this!" Ragatha said, giving Gangle a hopefully encouraging look. She didn't want her to worry about the possibility that Jax might come back soon. If Zooble was doing their job, Jax should, *hopefully*, be preoccupied long enough for Gangle to—

*Click.*

The soft noise made Ragatha jump, turning her focus on the door as it swung open.

"O-Oh. It worked." Gangle said softly, looking down at her twisted ribbon hands. Ragatha gave her a small pat of reassurance, stepping past her and into the room.

"Pomni?" Ragatha called out in a quiet voice, looking about the room for the jester. Like every room, Pomni's room had been crafted to fit the small jester's size and theme.

Blue and red walls. Props and items used for shows were pushed into one corner. Furniture to fit her small size with a comfy bed pushed to one wall. That's where Ragatha found her.

Pomni was laid out on her side on the bed, her back facing the door and visitors. She wasn't moving much, but there was a soft sound of someone breathing.

"Oh thank god." Ragatha let out a relieved sigh. Pomni was alive. She was breathing, here in her room. There weren't any screams of agony or pain as Ragatha feared. Pomni was fine. She was fine.

"It's warm."

Ragatha blinked, looking down at Gangle. "What?"

"The room." Gangle motioned inside. "There's a lot of heat coming from inside."

Ragatha stared at Gangle a moment, and then realized what she meant. There was heat. Pouring out of the room and into the hallway. Which was odd since none of the rooms had any heating. "That's... odd." Ragatha carefully stepped inside, looking around. "Did Jax leave an oven on or something in here?"

She looked around, trying to find the source of the heat.

It didn't make any sense. Why would there be heat? The Tent didn't need to regulate any temperatures, and there was no point since the weather outside was always nice and comfortable. Did Jax cause this? Why? What was the point? Was it for a prank? But what type of prank required heat?

“R-Ragatha!” Gangle’s worried cry snapped Ragatha out of her thoughts, looking towards the living ribbon. “It’s Pomni!” She pointed at the jester laying on the bed. “The heat’s coming from Pomni!”

*What?*

Confused and startled, Ragatha went over to the bed.

As she got closer, she could feel the heat rising. It worried Ragatha that if the heat kept growing, something might catch on fire. As she got close to the bed, she noted that the soft breathing coming from Pomni wasn’t what she first expected. Pomni’s breathing was coming out in short pants, heavy and almost sounding as if she was in pain.

“Pomni?” Ragatha slowly reached out to touch her, but quickly drew her hand away. The heat. It was radiating off Pomni in waves. It was highly concerning, and Ragatha was starting to suspect that something truly terrible was wrong with her. Gathering her courage, Ragatha reached out once again, trying to ignore how warm she felt, and gingerly touched the jester’s shoulder.

She was warm. Not unbearably hot as Ragatha suspected, but warm enough that it was very alarming.

“Pomni?” Ragatha called out. There was no response from the jester, and Ragatha was beginning to think the worst. “Pomni.” She called out a few times, trying to get a response, but there was nothing. Nothing but Pomni’s breath that was increasing and panting hard. Had she imagined it, or did Pomni get warmer? “Pomni. Pomni.”

Ragatha shook the small jester’s shoulder, her worry growing by the second as there continued to be no response. And the heat... Ragatha had to do something.

“Gangle, could you...” Ragatha looked up, and her voice trailed off.

Jax was standing in the doorway, glaring at her.

“Jax—”

“What are you doing in here?” Ragatha flinched. There was no mirth or hint of Jax’s usual mischief in his voice. “How did you even...” His eyes landed on Gangle. She was rubbing her hands, which were still wrinkled from picking the lock. “Doesn’t matter. You need to leave.”

“Le-No! Jax, what’s wrong with her?” Ragatha motioned to Pomni. The heat coming off her was abnormal, and she wanted to know what was wrong. She wanted to know what Jax was withholding from her.

She wanted to know if there was anything she could do to help Pomni.

“Nothing’s wrong. Now leave.”

“There’s not *nothing’s wrong*, Jax! There’s clearly something wrong with Pomni!”

“No there isn’t.”

“Yes there is!”

“No there isn’t!”

“Are you blind?! Do you not feel the heat coming off her?!” Ragatha motioned again to Pomni, who let out a stiff pained groan. “Don’t pretend that nothing’s wrong!”

“Because there isn’t anything wrong!” Jax stormed into the room, using his height to loom over Ragatha. “And it ain’t your concern either! I’ve got this under control so would you just leave?!”

“No! No, I will not leave!” Ragatha shot back, stomping her foot on the ground. “What’s going on?! What’s wrong with Pomni?! Why won’t you or Caine say anything?! You better tell me right now Jax!”

“I’m not obligated to answer anything! You’re the one who isn’t supposed to be here!”

“You’re not supposed to be here either!” Ragatha jabbed a finger in Jax’s chest. “This is Pomni’s room! Your room is the one on the other side! Shouldn’t you be there instead?!”

“I could say the same thing about you!”

“Guys?”

“Oh don’t go trying to make it like I’m the one in the wrong here!”

“Um, guys?”

“Well you are! Breaking in here when you were clearly told not to be, wow what a great role model you are, dollface!”

“G-Guys?”

“Like you’re any better! You’ve been using Pomni as an excuse to stay out of the adventures! I knew you #&%@ selfish, but this is a new low for you!”

“And you’ve never would have taken such advantage? Face it, any of us would take it in a heartbeat to stay out of those adventures, so there’s no real big whoop about it!”

“Hey, guys, you—”

“There’s No Big Whoop About Anything! God, You Really ARE Heartless!”

“G-Guys!”

“I’m Not Being HEARTLESS! I’m Being PRACTICAL!”

“PRACTICAL?!”

“I’m Using My Brain Here! Making Sure To Look Out For Myself In This @#\$ Godforsaken Place!”

“Guys? Guys?”

“UGH! For ONCE! Just ONCE! I Wish You—!”

“GUYS!”

“**WHAT?!**” The pair yelled, turning the angry gazes on Zooble and Gangle.

And then there was *screaming*.



Pomni felt like she was floating.

Drifting through an endless sea of darkness, bobbing up and down with no real movement.

Her mind felt fuzzy and heavy, like the rest of her body.

Thoughts drifted in and out, never sticking or staying long enough to be coherent enough to think.

A part of her was aware that... something was quite right.

Something important that she should know on the tip of her tongue, yet she could grasp what exactly it was.

Her mind was certainly no help.

It felt like it was stuffed with cotton.

Nothing really registered to her other than feeling heavy and fuzzy.

But there were voices.

Distant.

Far.

And hard to make out.

But she could hear them.

She wanted to reach out, grab whatever the closest voice there was, and yank it towards her and hold tight.

She wanted to hear what the voice was saying, form coherent words and listen as it anchored her down so she wouldn’t keep drifting.

But no matter how hard she tried, the voices were too far away, and her body didn't want to move.

It was like her limbs were all stone, and she was slowly being sunken into the dark depths of an endless abyss.

She didn't have a track of time, but it felt like eternity to her.

Drifting, sinking, floating, she didn't know which was better or worse.

She just wanted this to end.

She wanted to feel her limbs move and look at anything but darkness.

She wanted to listen to the voices and make sense of what they were saying... wait.

Were the voices... louder?

Pomni wasn't sure, and her head was still too fuzzy, but she swore that the voices... yes.

Yes!

They were getting louder!

She could hear them getting clearer!

For the first time in what felt like forever, Pomni could feel hope surging inside her.

Voices!

And they were getting louder and clearer!

As if a switch had been pulled, Pomni felt that she was drifting up.

Up towards the voices.

Drifting away from the darkness.

The fuzziness in her head clearing away as her senses returned to her.

She wanted to whoop in joy.

Finally!

Finally she was getting somewhere!

And then.

She hit a wall of fire.

And pure **AGONY** shot through her whole body.



Screams filled the tiny room.

Heat rising in temperature.

And there was panic.

“POMNI!” Someone shouted as Ragatha and Jax suddenly dashed forward to the bed.

Pomni was flailing on the bed. Screams of agonizing pain came tumbling non-stop from her mouth as heat pooled from her body. Her body spazzed, twitching with an occasional red glitch that cut through her screaming. Screaming that never stopped.

“Pomni!” Ragatha tried to reach for her. A part of her mind screamed at her to *stop, no, glitching spreads, don't touch her*, but someone grabbed her hand before she could touch Pomni.

“No! Don’t!” Jax’s eyes were wild, panic overtaking his smug demeanor for once. “You can’t touch her!”

“We can’t leave her like this!” Ragatha said, watching in horror as the glitches grew more intense. God, she’d seen plenty of things glitch, but seeing someone you know is another human being spazz and flicker in and out was disturbing. *And the heat*. It felt like she was standing in an oven, watching someone get baked alive. It was just horrible.

“Zooble! Bucket!” Jax called out to the mix-matched being, who stood frozen at the doorway, watching the scene in petrified horror.

“Wha-What?” They blink, glancing down at the bucket they held clutched in their arms like a teddy bear. Their arms shook as they held the bucket out, and Jax, swearing censors, rushed over to them, yanking the bucket so hard that Zooble’s arms were pulled out of their sockets. The rabbit wasted no time rushing back to the bed, upturning the bucket and dumping the contents onto Pomni.

A loud HISS filled the room as steam sprang up and filled the air. Another cry of pain, a few more glitches, and then silence.

Nobody moved.

The steam slowly cleared away, allowing everyone to see what was going on.

Pomni laid out on her bed, drenched and panting heavily. Steam was still coming off her body, and there was a small occasional red glitch, but not as bad as before.

*And she didn't have any eyes.*

A horrid gasp left Ragatha, covering her mouth in shock. Jax turned his focus on Zooble. “Go find something that can fill this with water.” He commanded, tossing the bucket to Gangle.

The pair didn't argue, too shocked to say anything even as Jax shouted at them to find water to fill the bucket. Once they left, he turned his focus on Ragatha. He was silent for a moment before sighing. "Mind grabbing a few ice cubes?" He pointed at the table beside the bed, where two buckets of ice along with a small pile of rags sat.

Ragatha looked at the ice, gazing at it numbly. She moved only when Jax gave her shoulder a nudge, grabbing a rag and filling it with ice. Handing it to Jax, the rabbit placed it on Pomni's head, which now Ragatha realized was covered in bandages.

She couldn't find the words to ask as Jax held out his hand to her. Immediately she filled another rag with ice and handed it to him. They kept at this until Pomni was almost completely covered. The steam slowly went away as did the glitching, and her breathing started to come out more even but still pained.

When Jax relaxed and slumped into one of the small chairs, Ragatha inched closer to the bed. She reached a hand out, hesitant, before placing it where she guessed Pomni's cheek was.

The jester's skin was warm. Not as much as she had been when Ragatha touched her earlier.

Now that Pomni was on her back, Ragatha could take a better look at her. Aside from the bandages wrapped around her head, and the concerning heat she gave off, Pomni looked normal at first glance. Examining closer however revealed that there was a small bit of bandages poking out from under the collar of her jester suit, and bandages were wrapped around most of Pomni's left hand.

Ragatha felt sick. No one needed bandages in the Digital Circus. They never got injuries to require them so there was no need...

"Jax," Ragatha's voice came out shaky, looking towards the rabbit with a growing abyss of worry in her stomach. "What's... what's..." She didn't have the strength to ask, wishing she could push away her worry and be brave enough to demand answers, an explanation, *anything* to clear away all the confusion twisting inside her brain.

Jax stared at her. Then looked at Pomni. He was silent for a long moment before letting out a sigh and kicked one of the chairs in front of him and motioning to it. "Grab a seat, Raggy. It's not an easy story to tell."

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was an odd silence that filled the room. One that was uncomfortable and uncertain that made the air heavy and unbearable.

Neither of them spoke as they stared at each other. Ragatha was tense and kept darting glances at Pomni whenever she made a low pained noise, nervously clenching and unclenching her hands on her dress. Jax looked more relaxed, yet there were hints to his own stress that Ragatha could pick up on. Years of being forced to work alongside someone often led to noticing things over time.

And the first big hint that tipped her off was that there wasn't any sign of his usual smug smirk.

Jax's teeth were always visible, colored in a yellow tint that he always wore in a smug grin or a wickedly mischievous smirk. But right now it was nowhere to be seen, and was replaced by a frown that didn't look like it belonged there.

It was strange.

The atmosphere was unreadable, awkward and heavy all in one. Ragatha had never seen Jax so... well, forlorn. Maybe not by much, she wasn't certain how much he felt about everything at the moment, but he wasn't making any jokes or mean sniping comments. And he wasn't kicking her out, so that had to count for something.

Finally, Jax began to speak. "So... how much do you want to know?"

"... all of it." Ragatha said, making Jax raise a brow.

"All of it?" He parroted. "You're not making this easy on me, dollface." A grin was back on his face, but it looked more forced than the natural easygoing grin he always had. "I don't even know where to start with that."

"Then start with something you do know." Ragatha's hand clenched hard on her dress, trying to ground herself before her worry could reach its peak. "Start with that and see how it goes?" Her voice came out more uncertain than she would have liked to admit, but Jax nodded his head.

"I think I can do that." He tapped his chin a few times, sighed, and said. "Caine can't fix it."

She felt like she had been dragged under water. "... what?"

"Caine can't fix it." Jax motioned his head to Pomni. "Can't fix her. Whatever happened to Pomni, he can't fix it."

“Wh-Wai-Wh-What?!?” Ragatha almost shot up from her seat. “Wh-What do you mean, *can’t fix it*?! What can’t he fix?! That’s-That’s impossible! He can fix anything!”

“Well apparently he found something he can’t fix.” Jax shrugged. “And it’s Pomni.”

“Why?” Ragatha asked, almost demanding as her heart raced. “Why can’t he fix her? He fixed everyone else when they glitched out, or-or-or impaled o-o-or I don’t know! He should have been able to fix Pomni!”

“He *should* have.” Jax interjected. “But he *can’t*. I don’t know why and neither does he...” He took a small glance at Pomni. “Caine tried. Multiple times, Rags. But no matter how hard or fast he snaps his fingers,” He snapped his own fingers towards Pomni. “It doesn’t change a thing.”

Ragatha looked at Pomni in horror. Caine couldn’t fix her? Why? He was able to fix everyone else countless times in the past, this shouldn’t have been any different. Heck, he healed Pomni’s hand when she first arrived here after... well, she rather not think too much about that. Even after Pomni started trying to find an exit and wound up hurt one way or another, Caine was still able to heal her with just a snap of his fingers. So why was it different now?

“Probably had something to do with the firework.” Jax’s voice cut through her turmoil, snapping her attention back on to him.

“Firework?”

“The one from the show.” Jax clarified. “Specifically the last one that went off and burned the whole stage.”

It took Ragatha a moment to realize what he was saying. Her eye and button widened, recalling the last firework that had gone off. As she thought about it, it did make some sense to her. The explosion the firework had given off had been big, and it had collapsed the Eiffel Tower prop in a burning mess that spread to most of the stage. The stage that was still out of order and undergoing repairs.

No one had been hurt by the explosion. They all had been on the ground and far enough from the tower not to be caught up in the damage...

No one except Pomni.

A cold dawning realization hit Ragatha.

Pomni was still on the tower when the explosion went off. She must have been close to the firework when it happened. And when it went off...

She felt sick to her stomach, looking at Pomni in grief. The poor jester had only been here for maybe a few months, and somehow she ended up in a horrible situation that she never asked for here in the Digital Circus.

"How... how bad is it?" She was almost too hesitant to ask. She wanted to know how bad the damage was for Pomni, but at the same time she feared to know the exact details.

Luckily, Jax only shrugged. "Bad. Not great, but at least her body is intact... mostly."

"Mostly?"

A flash of emotion crossed Jax's face, too quick for Ragatha to identify before he quickly covered it up. "Her face had the worst of it, as you can tell." He motioned to Pomni, pointing at her head where the bandages were wrapped up tight. "Her hand is pretty banged up and her chest isn't entirely better off, most likely because she must have tried to shield her face but only managed to reach up to her chest when the explosion went off, but they're not as bad as her face." He motioned his arm, lifting it in demonstration. "At least those last two are recovering. She was in a way worse state than this when—" He cut himself off.

"When... you found her?" Ragatha supplied, trying to imagine what horrors Jax could have seen when he peeked under the curtain from that day.

"... Yeah." Jax eyes darted away, looking to the side of the room. But it was enough for Ragatha. She could still remember the fear in the rabbit's eyes, the horror and silence that surrounded him.

Silence surrounded them again. Ragatha wasn't sure how much more she could take. The knowledge that Caine, the AI who had control over nearly everything, *except the minds of humans*, couldn't even fix or help Pomni. She wasn't sure if she should feel scared, worried, or intensely concerned. And it grew sickeningly worse when a thought crossed her mind.

If Caine couldn't heal this, then what else couldn't he fix? Obviously those who've been Abstracted since that only happened when someone completely loses their mind, one of the few things Caine didn't have control over. But what if there was more? What if there was a possibility that there were other things, more serious things, that Caine couldn't do? And if there were, what were they? And how would they be able to fix it?

That thought terrified her more than it should have, and she tried not to think about it. She didn't want her mind to slip into insanity.

It was already giving her a bad headache.

"Is there any good news at least?" She asked, rubbing her head to clear it of the turmoil thoughts bouncing around.

"Not much I can say that ain't obvious." Jax said. His eyes suddenly widened and he snapped his fingers. "Oh, but she is healing."

That managed to put her worry on a pause, looking up at Jax with a slight hopeful expression. "She... she is?"

"Don't get your hopes too high, Rags." Jax quickly warned. "Her hand and chest were in pretty bad shape, but they've slowly been healing. *Really, excruciatingly, slow.*" One of his

eyes twitched, clenching his fist slowly as if he was crushing an invisible object. He quickly put on his usual grin, relaxing back in his chair and had the gull to even cross one leg over the other and recline in the small furniture. “But it’s progress.”

“How can you tell?”

“Well for one thing, this room was a LOT warmer when I first started watching over her. Hot enough that I would have run out of this room a lot sooner if you were constantly banging on the door.”

“Excuse you, I was worried about Pomni!”

“And two,” Jax continued, ignoring Ragatha’s remark. “She’s not glitching out as much.”

“... g... glitching out?”

“She glitches whenever she gets too hot.” Jax said, looking at Pomni. “Whenever she gets close to being conscious or if her body hasn’t been cooled down, she glitches. It was really bad the first few times, but I think I managed to get the gist of it now.” He poked one of the bundles, plucking it up off Pomni’s body. “... dang. She’s melting through these too fast.” He muttered as water droplets dripped from the rag, dropping down into Pomni and made a soft hiss. He turned his attention to the buckets on the table, frowning at them when he peered inside. “Annnd most of the ice is gone too. Great.” He let out a groan, dropping the rag back on to Pomni’s body and stood up. “It’s going to take me hours to find more, and even more to find Caine if that doesn’t work.”

“Hours?” A shot of panic went through Ragatha, glancing at Pomni in worry. Hours with no ice meant that Pomni would quickly get warm, and then quickly become hot, and then that also meant—“I’ll go.” She quickly stood up. “I can go look around for Caine and tell him the situation. Maybe if I go—”

“Don’t bother, dollface. You know that’s not going to work.” Jax rolled his eyes, grabbing the buckets. “You know Caine’s not going to make it easy to find him unless someone goes jumping out into The Void.” His smirk grew a little more mischievous, looking towards Pomni. “Best not to become another little expert like someone we know.”

“Jax!”

“What? You’d think after the first time she’d learn. And it’s pretty funny watching her failing about after falling in.”

“You *threw* her in there, don’t think I’ve forgotten about that!”

“Come on, it was funny.” Jax causally shrugged as he walked past her. “Anyway, you keep an eye on her and just change the rags when they get dry, I’ll see you later.” With that, he gave her a mock salute, and quickly dashed away before Ragatha could say anything.

“Wha-JAX!” Ragatha called out once Jax’s smoke outline was gone, rushing to the door and looking out into the hall. “Get back here!”

She wanted to chase after him, but the rabbit was good at slipping away, and already she couldn't tell which direction he went. And there was the problem that she couldn't leave behind.

Ragatha looked over at the bed, hearing a painful groan come from the small jester. Pomni's small form looked so small and weak. It made her insides twist seeing one of her friends in so much pain. Was there really nothing Caine could do to help her?

Looking out into the hallway, Ragatha let out a sigh and returned to the jester's side, sitting down on the uncomfortably small chair and placed what she hoped was a comforting hand on Pomni's shoulder. "Don't worry, everything's going to be alright, new stuff." She spoke quietly, giving the shoulder a small squeeze. "Things will get better, I promise."

And she was going to make sure of it.

"Okay, first thing I think we should take care of are the sheets." Ragatha said, noting how the sheets under Pomni from the water Jax dumped on her earlier was quickly drying. It couldn't be comfortable laying on wet sheets, even as the heat coming off from Pomni was drying it out. "And then, we try to find a more comfortable solution to keeping you cool." She made a mental note as she carefully lifted Pomni off the bed to talk to Caine later.

Maybe with some luck she could help the AI to figure out a way to keep Pomni from overheating and hurting herself from glitching. Possibly one that didn't require flooding her whole room.



Not long after Ragatha manages to change the sheets with ones that were clean and, more importantly, dry, Zooble and Gangle finally returned with a bucket filled with water. It was good timing as well, as the ice had melted into puddles in the rags and Pomni was starting to get warm.

Ragatha did her best to explain the situation to the pair while wetting a clean rag, trying her best to act brave and in control. Even as Gangle began to panic slightly at the knowledge that Caine couldn't help Pomni and worried that something similar would happen to the rest of them. Zooble quickly shot that thought down quickly, but Ragatha was almost certain that they had the same worrying thought in their mind.

So she turned the conversation into one that would, hopefully, take their minds off the worrying idea. One that involved taking care of a certain jester.

"You want us to look after Pomni?" Zooble asked in a tone that was almost on the edge of disbelief, grumpiness, and anger when Ragatha told them her plan. "Why in the world would we do that?"

"You'd be helping a friend out?" Ragatha offered. Zooble narrowed their eyes at her. "... and it'd be a great excuse not to go on Caine's adventures."

That convinced them.

Now everyone was on board. Though convincing Caine was a bit of a struggle.

The AI, while happy that everyone wanted to help, wasn't fully convinced that everyone should take on the role of watching over Pomni. Since none of them were doctors, he wasn't completely comfortable with the idea. It took a lot of talking, slight manipulation, and maybe an adventure or two, but in the end they were able to convince him.

He set up a sort of schedule, giving everyone certain days that they would be assigned to watch over Pomni, though a good few were slightly concerned when they learned Bubble was added to the list as well. Caine's reasoning?

"THEY HADN'T BEEN INCLUDED IN THE STORY YET!"

And everyone knew it was pointless to figure out what *that* meant.

The first to watch Pomni had naturally fallen on Ragatha.

The ragdoll was more than happy to watch over the small jester. Though the task wasn't all that grand or great. Mostly all she did was wet rags and kept Pomni cool as best she could, yet she didn't let this deter her cheer. She even began talking, hoping it would bring some form of comfort to Pomni.

"And that's how the adventure ended." She finished up her latest re-encounter on a past adventure, folding clean rags and setting them aside on the table. "Pretty painful, I know. But it was still fun. And Zooble had mountains of blackmail on Jax to get him to behave... for a week or two. It's best you don't know the full details on that bit."

She chuckled to herself and smiled softly at Pomni's still form. There wasn't much improvement, and Pomni showed no signs of waking up.

Ragatha didn't know if that was a good thing or not.

The few times Pomni did regain consciousness, she screamed in agony and her body glitched out, never stopping until a bucket of water or two was dumped on her, forcing her back into unconsciousness. Those were always the worst times and Ragatha wished there was another way to keep the pain away from Pomni.

But she couldn't. She didn't know how to. Caine didn't have a clue, and Jax certainly was no help.

When he learned that everyone else would take over, he happily relinquished his position in watching over Pomni and often shoved Gangle or Kinger into doing the task when it was his turn. Ragatha was furious that he was skimping on his duty, but tried to reason with herself that Jax had spent the most time watching over Pomni, so he had some leeway to get away with.

Didn't mean she'd let him get away all the time. She was certain that she could pull Jax back into watching Pomni at any time she wanted.

For now though, she would allow Jax to freely dump his duties on someone else. *For now.*



Gangle was pretty sure she wasn't capable enough to watch over someone.

She wasn't a doctor, and she didn't have any backbone to stand up for herself so she couldn't argue against someone when they push or force her to do things she didn't want to. Jax loved picking on her the most, knowing just how weak her spirit was and could get away with no real retaliation or consequence.

She was an easy target. An easy, humiliating, and spineless target for him to pick on relentlessly.

So she was more than a little glad when it was her turn to watch Pomni. Again, she wasn't a doctor. She wasn't sure what her life was before the Digital Circus as most of her memories of her past were blurry aside from a select few she didn't want to think about.

Still, Gangle was happy to be doing something other than crazy adventures and not being a constant target for Jax's pranks. And it was simple enough! She just needed to keep Pomni from getting too hot and change the rags when they dried out.

Though her assistant wasn't making things any easier than they had to be.

"Bubble!" Gangle gasped in horror, watching as the living bubble creature ate one of the ice buckets that was meant to help keep Pomni cool in a single bite. "We needed that for Pomni!"

The AI merely blinked at her, staring for an uncomfortable amount of time as they floated in the air. Gangle wasn't sure why Caine thought Bubble would be a good assistant for her and she couldn't find her voice to ask before he disappeared. Not that it would have mattered. Caine only listened maybe half of the time while the rest seemed to fly over his head.

Bubble wasn't much better.

They kept eating the buckets filled with ice, taking longer hours to refill the water when they ran out, or even just floated there and stared at Gangle for uncomfortable amounts of time to the point Gangle wished she could pop them like Caine could when he got annoyed with the sentient bubble. And Gangle couldn't do a thing about it.

She wanted to help Pomni. She really did. Pomni was almost as nervous and shy like she was, only it varied from day to day how bad it could get.

Sometimes Pomni locked herself away in her room, others she would join in on the adventure, and sometimes her nerves got the best of her and she outright abandoned the adventure all together. She wasn't mean about it. Pomni always felt guilty when she left someone behind and struggled to apologize for her actions. It took her a while to properly apologize to Ragatha after her first day after all, and to Gangle after a certain adventure had her running away in fear.

She was a good person, but it was hard to help when Bubble made things so difficult.

Gangle tried to ignore the floating creature, letting out a small quiet sigh when she looked and saw that most of the ice was nearly gone. She looked at Bubble, wondering if she could ask them to go get some more ice, but decided that it wouldn't likely listen to her anyway, and went to grab more herself.

By the time she returned, Bubble had turned Pomni's room into an art studio and was using the jester as a canvas to paint on.



"Now it's quite easy to confuse Viceroy butterflies as Monarch and Monarch butterflies as Viceroy, mostly because they look almost strikingly similar in many aspects almost to an impossible degree, but there are notable clues to tell the pair apart! The Monarch butterfly has distinct recognizable look that nearly everyone is familiar with, and the Viceroy butterfly has the nearly exact same look, but if you look closely at the hind wings of each butterfly, you'll be able to notice that the Viceroy butterfly has a distinct horizontal line that goes through its hind wings while the Monarch—GHA!" Kinger flinched back. "Oh, Pomni. You startled me."

The chess piece chuckled nervously, staring down at his unresponsive audience.

He had been rambling on for hours about bug facts and behaviors almost nonstop, only being startled out of his rambling when his eyes happened to glance down and caught sight of Pomni's still figure on the bed. He'd likely forgotten why he was here telling Pomni about bugs and what he was supposed to be doing, but the helpful reminder that Ragatha had left behind whenever it was his turn came in great handy for the oldest and longest member of the crew.

"What was I... oh, yes right!" Kinger reached from the dry rag on Pomni's head, tossing it aside and grabbed one of the rags he dumped into the bucket, squeezing it to get most of the water out but failed to notice it was still dripping a lot as he folded it and dropped it over Pomni's face. "There we go! Prefect." Pleased with himself, Kinger congratulated himself for a job well done... and then let out a scream after staring at Pomni for a few seconds.



Jax didn't know what was worse.

Being trapped in a place that you can never escape from, or being forced to look after Pomni.

Most would consider the first option a real nightmare, but Jax was quite certain that it was more torture for him to sit here and do nothing.

Ragatha had caught him trying to slip his turn of watching over Pomni onto Gangle, again, and boy was she angry with him. After trying, and ultimately failing, to slip past and dump his turn on to the living ribbon, Ragatha dumped him into Pomni's room, told him to do his job, and went back to the others to start the day's adventure.

Irritated at the loss of his chance to prank someone today, Jax resigned himself to watching the jester. As much as he wanted to leave, Pomni couldn't be left alone. The last time someone did, Pomni had a really bad glitch attack, one that spread to most of her room before they all managed to dump buckets upon buckets of water to cool her down.

Caine had seen the major error of letting Pomni get too hot, and had installed a nice AC unit that pumped air loads of crisp, cool air into the room. If it weren't for the excessive amounts of heat coming from Pomni's small body, this room would have felt colder than the arctic. Thankfully, it just stuck to a pleasant temperature, and when the room was getting warmer, all anyone needed to do was turn the AC up to crank out more cold air.

It seemed to help.

Jax had noticed that less rags and water were being used up, and Pomni barely glitched anymore. Still, her body was still too warm, and there was no real sign that she was going to wake up soon.

If they wanted her to wake up that is.

Jax wasn't a fool. He knew Pomni would probably be in a great deal of pain when she woke up. She kept screaming in agony every time she regained a bit of consciousness and there was still no sign of her face recovering.

Her hand and her chest had healed up enough that the bandages could be removed, but her face remained tightly covered in bandages. Only Jax was allowed to see what was under there, and he made sure that the others couldn't look under there through Caine.

He still vividly remembered the first time he saw it, and he wasn't sure how well the others would take it if they saw it too.

He could take a few guesses who would take it the hardest and who would likely Abstract and didn't feel keen to send someone to the cellar anytime soon.

*Would Pomni Abstract from being too much pa-*

He pushed the thought aside before it could finish. Jax knew he couldn't think like that. If he did, he might end up falling into insanity and Abstracting himself. And that wouldn't be any fun. Naw, he'll play goody two-shoes for now and try not to worry about it.

He'll leave the worrying to someone else.

All he can do now is sit around.

And maybe think of a few pranks to pull.

~\*~

Perfectionism was everything to them.

Everything had to be in a specific way, in a specific order, in a specific style in order to achieve anything a max capacity.

If something was out of line, or didn't match, or placed in a spot they KNOW it shouldn't be, it would bug and irritate them so much that it would hurt till they gave in and tried to fix it. It wasn't Zooble's fault they were like this. They just liked everything to be perfect and orderly.

Pomni's room was far from perfect or orderly.

There was a reason why Zooble didn't like being in other people's rooms. Mostly due to the fact that they simply didn't care and wasn't interested. The other major factor was that there was no order.

Every little bit in their room was placed with careful, meticulous planning, stored and displayed just right, and everything was in perfect order so that they wouldn't fret or be bugged by anything out of place. The same could not be said about anyone else's room.

The chaos, the disorder, the sheer amount of imperfection that was everywhere! How could anyone stand to live in such a place?! It would drive them completely mad!

And Pomni's room nearly did when they first got a good look at it.

The mess. The disorder. How could the jester be content to live like this?!

They had to organize everything in this place to even be livable or even much less bearable to look at. Props were sorted against the walls, categorized by size, usage, and the likelihood of Pomni ever using them. Which would be never.

Next was setting the few items Pomni acquired over time in the Digital Circus. Toys and prizes she managed to win at the carnival were stacked on shelves, giving Zooble a difficult time to figure out which should go where that would look okay if not perfect. Some of the items they could tell were from Ragatha. Sweet, kind, and disgustingly sentimental.

But the most difficult thing they encountered, the most truly disorganized thing they came across in this room, in this very tent, had them completely entrapped that they couldn't stop the moment they started.

And that was the books in Pomni's bookshelf.

Apparently the jester had a fine collection of books, though all of them ranged from 'How To Be A Jester' to 'How To Make Everyone Laugh At Your Stunts' that were left untouched to gather dust.

And it irked Zooble that none of it was organized. Even worse was when they tried to organize this mess, they couldn't decide on how to do it.

By color? Size? Shape? Alphabetical? Numerical? Smell? Touch? Thickness? Pages?

There were so many ways they could go at this, and NONE of it was working. Ragatha's bookshelf was at least manageable, but this was almost a lost cause!

With a frustrated groan, Zooble threw the current book they were trying to sort to the ground, slamming it hard on the floor. It was impossible. There was no saving Pomni's bookshelf. It was out of their capability. And that made them even more angry.

Irritation rolled off their body, stomping over to the chair and plopped down on it with their arms crossed.

Jax had been right in some way when he said that watching Pomni would be a nightmare. Hardly anything changed and Zooble wasn't sure if Pomni would ever wake up. They could see that her hand had healed enough that it no longer had bandages, but her face was still wrapped up.

If Caine hadn't said that it was significantly important to leave them alone, Zooble would have unwound it and tried to make it more organized to look at.

"You know, you got some of the worst luck here, Pomni." Zooble huffed. "I always thought Kinger had it bad since he's been here the longest, but you really seem to take the cake. How could someone in a world where death and injuries are impossible to achieve somehow manages to get hurt so bad that they end up like this?"

The half expected a nervous answer out of Pomni, waiting for that shy and anxiety riddled voice to try and answer as best that they could. But nothing came. Nothing ever did when they all tried talking to the jester. No response ever came, and only the quiet breathing broke the stillness.

Zooble's eyes drooped. They'd never admit it, but they wished Pomni would get up and everything would turn out alright. They wished the jester would show everyone that she was fine and nothing to worry about. But Pomni continued to sleep, passed out on her bed with no signs of hearing anyone or even waking.

It had been more than two months now, and everyone was starting to wonder when Pomni would wake up.

Few worried that it was a bad idea to allow Pomni consciousness as the few moments she had regained them, she was in agony and pain. Others didn't wish for her to keep sleeping. They wanted her up and about and alright. Jax was indifferent.

Zooble didn't know where they stood. Of course they wanted Pomni to be awake, but at the same time they didn't want her in complete agony. Both sounded awful to be in and neither sounded better than the other.

Shaking their head, Zooble spotted something that needed their attention and stood to fix it. However, their body was a bit too close to the table and accidentally bumped into it. Without thinking, their hands subconsciously grabbed the table, trying to steady it, but in doing so had accidentally knocked off the bucket over the edge of the table.

"@#\$!" Zooble swore as the bucket hit the ground and spilled all the water out onto the floor. They kept swearing as they picked the bucket up and marched out of the room. Jax had shown where he normally went to get water for the buckets, but considering what they

knew laid inside, they didn't go there. Instead, they took a longer route to get to the closest source of water, which had twists and turns and various doors to go through before they achieved their goal of filling the bucket.

They flipped the bird at the screaming mannequin and left as soon as the bucket was completely full to the point of overflowing and marched right back to Pomni's room, wondering bitterly if they could convince Ragatha to watch Pomni for the rest of the day so they could retreat into their room and cool off.

When they got back, their irritation took a plummet.

Pomni was gone.

#### Chapter End Notes

So the next chapter might take a while to come out. The Bluetooth connection on my laptop went kaput, so that means no music or ASMR to listen to focus, and the constant barking of my brother's Pyrenean dog isn't any help. So it will likely be that I need to get a new laptop or get this one fixed, and I don't know how long that will take, so don't go thinking that this story's abandoned or flood the comments asking when the next chapter will be out. I promise that the next chapter will be out as soon as the Bluetooth is resorted, or the less likely chance I get a new laptop.

Have a nice day!

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

Good news: MY BLUETOOTH IS FIXED!

Bad news: Updates are still going to be slow because of the upcoming holidays

“You are by far the most confusing person I’ve ever met.”

“Oh good. I must be doing something right if I wasn’t.” Jax’s smug smile made Ragatha frown, her irritation growing by the minute.

The day’s adventure had been a fishing challenge. One with Caine’s usual twist that ended being more than it seemed and with everyone running, or in this case, swimming for their lives. After some screaming, drowning, and almost being eaten by a giant monster fish, Jax was officially declared the winner since he was the only one with a fish.

The same fish which he carried over his shoulder and intended to take back to his room as a trophy.

“Why are you even bringing this back? You know Caine wouldn’t let you keep it. How did you even manage to sneak it past him? He sees everything!”

“There’s a special little thing called pockets, dollface. You should invest in them more often.”

“How would it even fit? It’s like the size of a dog!” Ragatha motioned to the large fish slung over Jax’s shoulder, which was roughly the size of a large sack of potatoes. It wasn’t a normal-looking fish either. The fish was a bright yellow, with pink, green, and orange polka dots splattered all around its body. Its head was massive, with a jaw that gave it an overbite and eyes out of portion, giving it a derpy look. But what was most eye-catching was its fins, which were all pointing in the opposite direction. Even the tail fin was flipped, looking as if someone had edited the fish’s appearance with an art program. “Something that size shouldn’t fit in your pockets.”

“Well, actually, we can fit a large number of objects in our pockets. Since the physics in this world don’t abide by the laws of the real world, we could put just about anything in them!”

Ragatha let out a small sigh, touching her forehead to ease the ache forming in her mind.  
“Thank you for the recap Kinger.”

“... re-what?”

Ragatha only shook her head, turning her attention back on Jax. “Why do you even want to keep it? It’s... you know.”

“What? Cool?” Jax slid the fish off his shoulder, holding it before Ragatha. The doll flinches away. “Interesting?” Jax inched the fish closer, and Ragatha took a step back. “Awesome?” Ragatha pulled a face as the fish was lifted close enough to touch her face. “I don’t know.” Jax shrugged as he pulled the fish away. “But it’s neat!”

His smirk grew as he turned his eyes on Gangle, mischief glinting in his eyes as he quickly spun and held the fish up, letting out a roar that startled Gangle and by extension Kinger as well. Laughing, he slung the fish back over his shoulder, smirking at the ground. “And it’s grade a prank material in the making.” He chuckled as he continued on back to The Tent.

Ragatha heaved a heavy sigh. Jax was back to his old prank-pulling self. She wasn’t sure if she liked that he was acting like his old self. His pranks weren’t normally anything to laugh at, and they really got on everyone’s nerves. But no matter if they tried to tell him to stop, Jax wouldn’t listen, and he certainly didn’t care.

“I hope he’s not planning anything tomorrow with that fish.” Gangle quietly said, clutching the pieces of her comedy mask that had once again broken during the adventure. “Especially since you’re not going to be there to stop him.”

“Oh, that’s right! It’s your turn to watch Pomni tomorrow, isn’t it?” Kinger asked.

“It is.” Ragatha nodded her head. “I’m sorry you guys have to deal with Jax tomorrow. But at least it’s just for one day! And I’m sure he’ll be more focused on the adventure than trying to... constantly pick on you. B-but at least you’ll have fun!” She laughed nervously. “All I do is just sit around and watch Pomni. Who still hasn’t... recovered. B-but I’m sure she will soon! We’ve all been pitching in to help. You, me, Gangle, Jax, *surprisingly*, and even—”

**“YOU!”**

An angry shout cut through Ragatha’s rambling, taking everyone by surprise. Not as surprised as Jax when something shot out from The Tent’s entrance that made a straight dash at him. He didn’t have time to act before something clocked him in the jaw. The rabbit was sent flying to the ground, dropping his fish who immediately took the opportunity to sprout legs and run back to the Digital Lake.

“Hey wh-!” Jax sat up, rubbing his sore cheek as Zooble glared down at him with a look so intense it could murder someone. He didn’t get a chance to say anything before Zooble rushed at him again, grabbing his neck with their odd assorted hands and tried crushing his windpipe.

“ZOOBLE!” Ragatha immediately rushed to Jax’s aid, wrapping her hands around the take-a-part being and tried to pull them away. Kinger and Gangle tried to lend their aid as well, but all anyone managed to do was pull Zooble’s arms out from their sockets with their hands still choking Jax. “Zooble stop!”

“YOU IDIOT! YOU COMPLETE &@%# OF A #^@%\$#! DO YOU REALLY FIND IT THAT #@&\$#\*&@ FUNNY?!” Zooble screamed as they tightened their grip on Jax’s throat. “YOU’RE A MESSED UP #&\$%@! A COMPLETE \$#%@&#\$@ ^#&\$%@&! USING

OUR MISERY AS SOME SICK TWISTED AMUSEMENT FOR YOUR DUMB #^@%\$# PLEASURE!"

"Zooble!" Ragatha tried to pry the hands off from Jax's neck, but they were iron-tight.  
"Zooble calm down! What's gotten into you?! Shouldn't you be looking after Pomni?!"

"THIS @&% DECIDED TO PULL A PRANK!"

"What?! What are you talking about?!"

"HE #&@#\$ PULLED A STUPID \$%@# PRANK WITH POMNI!" Zooble screeched, trying to rush at Jax, but Kinger and Gangle managed to keep them at bay. "I LEFT TO GET WATER, AND THIS #@&%# DECIDED TO PULL SOMETHING WHILE I WAS GONE FROM THE #%@%#\$ ROOM!"

"Wait! Zooble! You're not making any sense!" Ragatha tugged with all her might, hoping to help Jax while trying to understand the situation better. "Jax was with us the whole time!"

"#@^#\$@\*!"

"It's true! We were all in one of Caine's adventures the whole day at the Digital Lake! Jax couldn't have done whatever he might have done while you were gone! I swear he was with us the whole time!"

"BULL@&%\$!" The arm Ragatha was pulling suddenly let out of Jax's throat, pointing straight at her face as Zooble ranted. "YOU COULDN'T HAVE KEPT AN EYE ON HIM THE WHOLE TIME! HE COULD HAVE EASILY SNUCK AWAY WHILE ALL OF YOU WERE #&@%\$# DISTRACTED AND NOW POMNI-!"

"I!" Jax struggled with the remaining arm, giving it a few harsh yanks before finally dislodging the clawed appendage from his neck. "I!" He took a few deep breaths, keeping the arm at a distance as it tried to strangle him again. "I didn't do *anything* to Pomni!"

"LIAR!"

"I'm not lying! I haven't pulled a single prank on Pomni ever since the incident!" Jax clarified, moving his head away as the claw kept snapping at his face. "There's no point to! She's unconscious and it's no fun when no one reacts to my pranks! How would I get any kicks out of someone who sleeps all the time?!"

"By doing something that affects us!" Zooble snapped, their anger dying down but their ire was still white hot. "Don't pretend you haven't pulled any pranks on us when we were watching Pomni! You do it all the time!"

"I hadn't pulled any pranks today!" One of Jax's ears was grabbed by Zooble's claw, pinching down at it and making the rabbit wince. "Ow! I'm serious here, Zooby! I haven't pulled any pranks on you! I swear I haven't!"

"It's true!" Kinger surprised everyone by speaking up. "Jax was really with us the entire day, he couldn't have pulled anything on you!"

“And I would have been there to enjoy watching it unfold if I had!” Jax added in. “Seriously, Zooble! You know me better than that! What’s the point of pulling any pranks if I’m not there to see funny stuff happening?!”

“Well—! You—!” Zooble struggled with their words. They were still angry, but some of their words were making sense to them. Still... “You’re always pulling pranks! All kinds of them! You don’t ever stick to one thing! You once pulled an elaborate prank that lasted an entire \$&^#% week! And now you want me to believe that you *didn’t* hide Pomni somewhere just to mess with me?!”

A silence fell over the group.

“... come again?”

“I said that you moved Pomni somewhere just to mess with me!”

Everyone was quiet.

“... **WHAT—?!**”



Panic was a very common thing to feel here.

Kinger was a prime example of panicking over anything and everything even over the slightest bit.

Everyone could panic over anything in the Digital Circus, though not as much as the living chess piece.

Normally panicking was only reserved during Caine’s adventures, or when Kinger was startled by... anything, but that didn’t mean there were other chances to panic.

The Digital Circus had plenty of hidden secrets just waiting for an opportunity to startle anyone and cause quite a stir in The Tent.

This time, it hadn’t been an adventure or something popping out from one of the random doors strewn about the place.

It just happened to be Pomni.

Who had gone missing from her room.

“HOW DID YOU LOSS POMNI?!” Jax stared at the bed in alarm. He had grown used to seeing Pomni’s still figure lying on the sheets, so it unnerved him to see the bed empty and vacant of any jesters. “All You Had To Do Was Watch Her, That Should Have Been The Easiest Job For You To Handle!”

“Excuse you! I’m just as confused as you are!” Zooble shot back. Once they realized that Jax hadn’t pulled any pranks, they explained everything to the troop about Pomni’s sudden

disappearance. “She was right here when I left, I don’t understand how she could have disappeared!”

“Okay! Okay! L-Let’s not panic here!” Ragatha stood between them, trying to calm her racing heart and think clearly about this. “M-maybe there’s a logical explanation to this!”

“*Logical?* You know that word barely exists in a place like this right?”

“Doesn’t mean there can’t be one!”

“And what’s the logical answer here? That she got up and walked away?” Zooble huffed.

“Hate to break it to you, dollface, but that’s hardly possible considering what we know.”

“I know!” Ragatha groaned. She knew it was highly unlikely that Pomni had gotten up on her own. Not with the way her body glitched out whenever she was awake. Zooble would have been able to hear her and found her by now. And it worried Ragatha because if Pomni started glitching, she could potentially spread it to other areas. And the heat... “We... we just need to think about this clearly before doing anything drastic. Was there anything out of the ordinary before Pomni went missing?”

“Not that I can think of.” Zooble shook their head. “Everything was fine when I left. Pomni was on the bed, the water was gone from the bucket so I had to go out and find some.”

“Find some?”

“I didn’t go where Jax usually goes to get water, I had to take the long way to find any.”

“What’s wrong with the one I showed you?”

“You know #@\$%#@\$\$#\$^& why I wouldn’t use that one. And you shouldn’t either!”

“Arguments for later guys.” Ragatha cut in before an argument could break out. “And you immediately assumed that Jax was the one who moved her?”

“Seemed like something he would do.”

“I take great offense to that.” Jax crossed his arms. “And I’ll have you know that this would be one of the lamest pranks I could ever possibly pull. Moving an unconscious body? Where’s the fun and entertainment in it? Really, Zooby, you should have known better.”

“Well if you didn’t pull so many mean pranks all the time, no one would jump to conclusions like that Jax.” Ragatha pointed out as Zooble glared at him. “Right now, we need to focus on finding Pomni. And soon. Poor new stuff must be burning by now from the heat she gives off.” Mentioning this made Jax and Zooble gaze in slight worry towards the bed.

They too knew the risk of Pomni’s glitches and didn’t know how bad it could be before someone found her.

Their attention snapped to the door as Kinger and Gangle appeared. “She’s not in any of the rooms.”

“We checked all of them. *Even the empty ones.*” The last sentence came out in a hush from Gangle’s mouth, yet everyone knew not to ask which of the empty rooms she was referring to.

“Great! So she’s not here then!” Zooble huffed, throwing their hands in the air. “Of course it couldn’t be that simple!”

“We can’t rule that entirely out yet. Pomni could still be somewhere else. We just need to look around first.”

“And where would she be at?”

Ragatha pondered for a moment. Where would Pomni be at? If she was moved somewhere else, then where… “Oh!” An idea hit Ragatha. “Maybe she’s in one of the other doors in The Tent!”

“Grrreat, that narrows down our search to like, what? A *million* places?” Jax said with a snark.

“Actually there’s a chance that there’s an infinite number of places to look! The digital world is always changing and things aren’t bounded by limits here.” Kinger happily explained, earning a groan from everyone.

If that was true, then there was likely an infinite possibilities to where Pomni could be.

“Maybe we should get Caine,” Ragatha said. “He could find her in a jiffy.”

“Oh sure, sure.” Jax slowly nodded his head before his grin dropped to a frown. “If you can *find* him.”

“Well, we...” Ragatha let out a sigh. Caine had gone off once the adventure had finished, remarking something about fixing the stage or something before teleporting away. “Okay, new plan.” She turned to the others. “We split up and search in different areas. We’ll be able to cover more ground and find Pomni faster. Kinger,” The chess piece let out a startled yell. “You check the lower floors, see if you can find any sign of Pomni. Jax, you search the second floor, Zooble is on the third, Gangle will look on the fourth, and I’ll...” She let out a deep sigh, already dreading what she was going to say. “I’ll look around in the highest area of The Tent.”

She heard someone make a hiss.

“You... you sure that’s a good idea?” Kinger asked, tilting his head to one side in a way that looked like he was about to fall over. “The highest area is, well, really high. A fall from that height can be quite painful.”

“Someone has to look.” Ragatha shrugged. “And I have pretty good balance. And if I do fall, ha, at least I know that I can’t die.” She tried to lighten the mood, but the grim looks on

everyone's faces... "Anyway! The faster we get looking, the faster we find Pomni! Agree?" A few murmurs went about the room. "Great! Let's get looking!"

~\*~

The Tent was a lot bigger than it seemed.

While The Tent looked harmless on the outside, everyone knew it was a deception.

The Tent had many layers to it. Floors that had doors that could lead to anywhere or nowhere. Paths that took twists and turns with no real direction to go. Some hallways were as confusing as it could be in a place like this and made no sense whatsoever.

Everyone had tried to navigate The Tent, trying to make a layout of this place and get some semblance of understanding of this building. But just as they had given up trying to find an exit, so too had they given up trying to map this place after only a few days. Pomni still tried to, still very determined to find an exit.

Everyone couldn't understand why Pomni was so determined to find an exit. They all had tried to leave, just like she had when they first arrived, but had given up when they realized that there was no exit. But the jester was dead set on finding a way out of this digital world. Though for how long, no one knew. The best they could do was warn her of which areas to avoid in her search.

Some areas of The Tent were less pleasant, and many of them avoided those areas unless necessary.

The Tent had a countless number of rooms and hallways, each differentiating on each floor. One floor will have at least one or two hallways filled with doors, while other floors will have objects sticking out from the walls or have doors in odd placements that defy the laws of physics, gravity, and understanding.

And not everything was as it seemed.

Gangle knew this well as she carefully checked the fourth floor.

Large assortment of children's toys stuck out from the walls in various angles. Some of the textures on these titan-sized playthings had skies or friendly-looking meadows, while others were just brightly colored with cute prints. If she were younger, Gangle was sure she would have liked the colorful sights as a child.

But not everything was bright and colorful, no matter how cheery they seemed.

"P-Pomni?" She called out quietly, peeking into one of the few doors she could find on this floor. Inside was a normal-looking living room, though true to the strangeness of the Digital Circus, everything was upside down and hanging from the ceiling. There was even a bat sitting in one of the chairs at the dining table reading a newspaper with tiny spectacles sitting on the bridge of their nose, taking a sip from a mug.

Seeing that Pomni wasn't in the room, Gangle quietly shut the door and let out a sigh. She had been searching for what felt like an hour, and there was still no sign of Pomni anywhere. It worried the ribbon. Where could she be? She could be anywhere in The Tent. Maybe Ragatha was right about getting Caine. He could easily snap his finger and summon Pomni right before him in a second.

*But what if he couldn't? A little voice whispered in the back of her mind. He couldn't fix her when she got hurt. What if he couldn't summon her or teleport her back? What if he lost his ability to fix things? What if there was something horrible going on, and didn't want to tell anyone?*

So many what-ifs circled through Gangle's mind as she opened another door. Behind this one, the room was filled with weaving looms, all crafting different varieties of tapestries and rugs, all being woven by disembodied hands. Gangle glanced around, stepping inside to make sure Pomni wasn't there.

When she checked nearly every corner of the room and concluded that Pomni wasn't here, she turned to leave. However, before she could reach the door, one of the disembodied hands grabbed her, yanking her back into the room. Gangle let out a startled shriek as her body was woven into a tapestry.



Kinger was in a daze.

His memory was fuzzy at best, but he was sure that there was something... important that he needed to do. Something that had to do with the ground floor of The Tent. What was it again? He couldn't remember.

Was it a new adventure? Was he supposed to be somewhere? He couldn't remember. Maybe he should find someone and ask them.

Who was it that was usually helpful again? Zooble? No. Gangle? No. Kaufmo? Oh, wait. Abstracted. Caine? **NO.** Jax? **OH GOD NO.** Ragatha? ... maybe. Pomni?

... Pomni.

Oh! Now he remembered! He was supposed to be looking for Pomni! That's why he was here.

The chess piece hovered over to one of the corners of a large colorful block, peeking around it. There was no sign of the jester, so he quickly moved to the other corner at the end, peeking around that. He repeatedly kept checking each corner of the cube, losing count of how many corners he looked around... until he forgot why he was doing this.

What was he doing again?



Zooble wasn't sure how they got stuck searching the third floor.

The third floor was, by far, the most chaotic floor of The Tent. Random doors that stuck in every wall in every direction, random objects sticking out from everywhere, not to mention how the hallway would often twist and turn in odd directions that split off into nowhere they further in someone went. It was such a mess of bizarreness, Zooble couldn't stand it.

They often tried to avoid the more chaotic and bizarre areas of the Digital Circus, feeling every bit of irritation and anger seeing all the imperfections surrounding them. Their fingers and claw twitched with an unbearable urge to tear everything and make it perfect. How? They didn't know.

They were sure that they could try organizing it till it was no longer an eyesore, make it more presentable and less of a horrible scenery vomit some designer program barfed out and called art. They already could see how they could fix...

No. Stop it. You're not here to bemoan the horrendously \$&@% job this place was. They were here to look for Pomni.

Zooble groaned inwardly, cursing inside their head at Ragatha, which was also censored. Why in the world did Ragatha send them here? Why did she think sending a perfectionist to the most chaotic floor of the whole circus was a good idea?! It was driving them MAD!!!

Irritation sparked in their mind when they passed a door that was half straight, half bent on an odd angle, feeling angrier and angrier the longer they looked at this place.

*Find Pomni.* They chanted in their mind. Hoping the mantra would keep them focused on their task and not on the disgusting disorganization around them. *Find Pomni. Focus on finding Pomni, and get the #&@%# out of here.*

Zooble kept repeating this to themselves as they went in deeper, hoping to find the little jester soon and get out of here.



There were areas in The Tent that were bizarre, and then there were places that could put you in life-threatening situations.

No one could really die in the Digital Circus, they've all experienced horrible and traumatizing stunts that would have killed a normal person under different circumstances. But no matter how much they've been stabbed, burned, crushed, and drowned, no one could die in the Digital Circus. It hurt a lot, and the experience wasn't anything to really laugh at, but death wasn't an option here, much to the dismay of others.

Falling was not a fun experience. The thought of it was terrifying, but not as much as experiencing it when someone dropped from the sky with nothing to stop them. And the impact when you hit the ground was painful, excruciating depending on what you could land on. It wasn't by any means a pleasant feeling to enjoy, and Ragatha was certainly glad when her feet finally touched solid ground again.

Searching the highest area of The Tent was not fun. Ragatha knew that one fatal misstep could send her tumbling down to a painful impact on the floor, but thankfully, she was able to keep her wits and her balance while looking up there.

She didn't find Pomni, but the good news was that she didn't need to keep looking up there now! Now she just needed to look elsewhere. Which was... going to be a lot of places to look... b-but at least she knew Pomni wasn't at the highest place! That was good! And, hey, maybe the others were having better luck than her!

She just needed to find them first.

Her first thought was to check Pomni's room and see if anyone had any luck. If anyone found Pomni, they would have surely taken her back to her room. Or so she thought.

When she arrived, she saw that no one was there.

But that was okay! It just meant everyone was still looking! She could probably go check on them and see if they needed any help.

She went to go check on Kinger first, spying the chess piece circling around a large cube and peeking around every corner. She couldn't help but feel that he'd been doing this for a while now. She exchanged a few words with him, after he got over being startled, and the chess piece insisted that he had things under control down here. Ragatha wasn't completely sure if that was true since he went back to circling the cube again muttering about an insect collection when she left him alone.

She spent the majority of her time looking around the ground floor just to be sure Pomni wasn't there before deciding to check on Gangle.

Being around the longest, aside from Kinger who had been here longer than her, Ragatha knew the fourth floor was relatively safe. Most of the doors led to non-threatening places and was generally an okay place to go, so she was sure Gangle would be alright if she sent her there.

How wrong she was when she found her.

Poor Gangle had been woven into a tapestry, one that was depicting an old theater show with one of the performers holding Gangle's face as a mask. Ragatha had to struggle to get her out of the room, being chased around by disembodied hands who were not too happy that she was stealing their unfinished work and then had to spend an hour unraveling the tapestry to get Gangle out. Once Gangle was freed, she sent the poor girl to watch over Kinger, checking the rest of the floor by herself.

Once she was sure Pomni was not there, she went to check on Zooble... and realized she made a horrible mistake sending them to the third floor.

"I am so sorry."

"Save it."

“Zooble—”

“SAVE. IT.”

“I’m really sorry.” Ragatha nervously bit her lip, rubbing her hands nervously. The pair were heading to the second floor to check on Jax, though Ragatha had an inkling feeling that Zooble just wanted to head straight for their room and lock everyone out. After seeing the third floor, Ragatha couldn’t blame them. Zooble was a perfectionist through and through, so a chaotic mess of a hallway was not the best place for someone like them to see. “I forgot how the third floor looked, I-I wouldn’t have sent you there if I remembered—”

“Shove your #%@& excuses up your @#&\$, I don’t want to hear it.” Zooble grumbled, hobbling ahead of Ragatha.

Ragatha flinched at the harsh tone, but she didn’t say anything about it. Zooble was furious at her, and rightly so. She had no right to try and justify her actions, even if it was a simple mistake.

As the pair headed for the second floor, Ragatha noticed a door that was slightly ajar up ahead. Thinking that someone might have left it open, she went ahead to close it. Things tented to get out and make a mess of things if the doors were left open, and it would give Caine an idea for a new adventure. She reached inside, briefly hoping that nothing got out as she went to close it, but stopped when her eye caught on to something. “What the—?” Her eye widened, and irritation flooded her being when she realized what she was looking at. “Jax!”

The humanoid rabbit was laid out in a hammock, strung up between two palm trees. A pair of shades were over his eyes and he held a coconut in his hand with a twirly straw stuck inside. The real kicker was that a pair of crabs were fanning him with large leaves, and a sea turtle slowly crawled by with a tray of drinks on its back, which Jax casually snatched up and took a sip.

Seeing the rabbit was not looking for Pomni, Ragatha stormed inside, heading straight for the rabbit. She grabbed one end of the hammock, untying it from the tree, and held it up. When Jax finally noticed her presence, she let go, causing the rabbit to tumble to the ground.

“... nice to see you too, dollface.”

“What are you doing?” Ragatha glared down at the rabbit. “You’re supposed to be looking for Pomni!”

“I am.” Jax smiled smugly up at her, holding up his drink. “I’m looking through all the drinks to make sure she didn’t get stuck in them.” He took a long sip of his drink, peering over his shades, and looked inside. “Hmm, nope, not in this one.” The smugness of his grin made Ragatha fume.

How dare he relax while everyone was running around ragged trying to find their missing friend!

“Ow!” Jax let out a yelp of pain as Ragatha grabbed him by the ears and dragged him out the room. “Hey! Hey! OW! Watch the ears!”

Ragatha ignored him as she continued to pull him along, passing through the door with the youngest member dragging behind her while Zooble watched with slight amusement in their eyes. They always enjoyed it when Ragatha showed her not-so-nice side. Specifically when it was towards Jax.

“Ow! What gives Rags?!”

“You!” Ragatha whirled on Jax, lifting him up by his ears. “Are supposed to be helping us find Pomni! And yet here you are relaxing while one of our friends is still missing!”

“You haven’t found her yet? What a bummer.” Jax said with no real hint of concern, smiling smugly at Ragatha who glared at him. She let go of his ears, letting him fall to the floor.

“How are you not taking this seriously, Jax?” Ragatha scolded as Jax picked himself off the ground and dusted himself off. “You know what could happen if Pomni gets too hot, do you really want the glitch to spread to The Tent?”

“Oh relax will ya? I’m sure Pomni’s fine. You worry too much.”

“Jax! I’m serious!” Ragatha’s ire grew as the rabbit put his hands behind his head and started to walk off while whistling a tune. “Pomni could be in serious pain right now! How can you not see how serious this is?!”

“Even Kinger can see how bad it is, and he’s the least mentally stable out of all of us.” Zooble added.

“You guys are overreacting.” Jax shrugged, spinning around and walking backwards. “I’m sure Pomni’s fine. You’re just being too serious about this.”

“Jax!”

“Besides, I’m pretty sure that the kid will pop up at any—gah!” Jax tumbled to the ground, surprising Ragatha and amusing Zooble. “Oh come on!” Jax sat up with a groan, rubbing his head. “Why does this keep hap—?!”

“Ow.”

A quiet, almost silent voice cut through the tension. Everyone’s eyes widened, slowly turning their gazes to the floor.

There, tangled under the rabbit’s lanky long legs, slowly lifting her bandaged head in pain, was the missing jester.

“POMNI!”

It was dark.

That was the first thing Pomni noted as she slowly regained consciousness.

It was dark. It was warm. And her head hurt like \$@#%&.

A groan escaped from Pomni, dully noting how sore and dry her throat felt as she weakly pushed herself to sit up. Why was it so dark? And why did her throat feel so dry? And her head. It felt like she bashed it against a stone or something hard multiple times.

She reached up, placing a hand on her face. It took her a while to note that there was something on her face. Reaching with her other hand, Pomni felt around her head, feeling something covering the top half of her head and over her eyes. A race of panic overcame her, trying to grab and tug the unknown item off her face.

Whatever it was, it was stuck on tight.

For a moment, Pomni thought it was the weird headset she put on that sent her to this crazy place, and tried frantically to pull it off. All that did though was send her tossing and turning on the bed, which ended with her falling out in a tumble.

A pained squeak left her mouth when her head collided with solid ground. Pain flashed through her head, and Pomni decided that maybe it wasn't a good idea to touch whatever was on her face at the moment.

Pushing herself to sit up, Pomni noted that one of her hands felt wet, and the ground under felt soaked. Oh god. She hoped this was just water.

The thought of water suddenly made her realize how dry the back of her throat felt. She knew no one needed to eat, drink, or sleep in the Digital Circus, but there were a few acts that had her spewing out fire from her mouth and left behind a nasty burning feeling in her mouth that needed a few mouthfuls of water to quench. Had Jax slipped a chill pepper in her food again? It would probably explain why her throat felt so dry and warm.

Maybe it could also explain why she felt so hot.

Pomni ran her tongue over her lips, trying and failing to wet them with saliva she no longer had. God, her mouth felt so dry. She needed a drink, or something to get rid of the horrible dryness.

Staggering to her feet, Pomni nearly fell over before her hands grabbed, what she assumed to be, the bed. She finally realized how shaky and unsteady her limbs were, and how her legs didn't seem to support her weight.

What was going on? Why did she feel so weak? Why was her throat so dry? Why was everything so dark?

Pomni didn't want to think about it.

It was probably the result of one of Caine's adventures, and she didn't want to be a part of it.

What she wanted was some water or a nice cold drink that could take care of this burning in her mouth.

Which was rather difficult once she managed to stumble out of the room, landing on the floor with a thud. A pained groan rumbled in the back of her throat, making it more irritated and painful. It took Pomni a while to crawl to the closest wall, which was somewhat difficult to find because everything was *just so dark*, but when her fingers found something solid under their touch, Pomni quickly pushed herself up onto her shaky legs, placing her weight on the wall for support.

Why was she like this? What was wrong with her? She hadn't felt this weak since...

Pomni shook her head, which was a bad idea as her head flared a little in pain from the motion. Okay, don't shake your head around a lot. Noted. Now where was the closest water faucet?

Picking a random direction, Pomni slowly scooted along the wall, keeping her body close to it as she didn't trust her legs to hold her up without support. Pomni had no idea where she was going, and that thought terrified her, but the burning itch in the back of her throat pushed it away from now. She needed water. Something cool that would take care of the unbearable warmth in her mouth.

She flinched when her hand suddenly felt nothing, panicking for a moment before she realized she was at a corner and moved around it.

She kept going for what felt like forever, feeling around in the darkness and wishing she could take off the item that was blinding her and see where she was going. Where was she going anyway?

She didn't know. She couldn't see. And it was horrifying.

Where was she even going? Did she even know where she was? She didn't even know where she was heading, or why she was going this way. Was there a drinking fountain this way? Maybe something that could take this thing off her head? She didn't know. It was too dark to tell. Maybe she should have taken Ragatha's offer to explore The Tent some more. Maybe then she could have a better layout of this place and figure out where she was going.

After what felt like hours, Pomni's legs finally gave out from under her, sending her falling to her knees. How long had she been walking for? It felt like she went on a marathon and ran a few laps.

Sitting herself down on the floor, Pomni took a moment to relax and gather her thoughts, trying to remember why she was like this. Most of it was hazy, but Pomni swore she could remember doing something, and then a bright flash and then... nothing. It was startling how she couldn't remember, but at least it wasn't as bad as forgetting her name.

She wished someone was with her to help. Having some guidance and maybe an explanation would probably make her feel better and make sense of what exactly was going on.

At least Jax wasn't here to tease her. Pomni wasn't in the mood for one of his mean pranks right about now, and it really wouldn't help with her situation.

God, she really wished someone would just appear right now and help her!

"OKAY!"

A dry scream tore out from Pomni's throat, which caused her throat to flare in pain. She doubled over, falling into a coughing fit that was harsh and unrelenting and causing her even more pain.

"Wow. You don't sound too good. You should drink some water!"

Something cold was pressed into her hands, making a soft clinking sound that somehow reminded Pomni of ice in water.

*Water.*

Pomni slowly lifted the object to her lips, taking a sip around her coughing fit. Cool, crisp, fresh water hit her tongue, and it took all of Pomni's will not to guzzle it all down in one gulp. The burning ache in her throat slowly ebbed away with each sip, cooling the burning heat inside her until it was nothing more than a dull ache.

She lowered the glass, taking a deep breath. The ache was still there, but the burning had gone away. "Th-thank you." She said, but her voice sounded hoarse and dry, almost as weak as her body.

"No problem Pomni!" She flinched at the voice. Where was it coming from? Who was speaking to her? "It's me! Bubble!"

Bubble?! Caine's pet/assistant/creature thing?!

"That's me!"

Oh god! This was worse than Jax!

"Is it?"

Because if Bubble was around, Caine was sure to be close by!

"He's not. He's busy trying to stop the mouse and rat armada that's been going on under the stage!"

"... what?" Pomni could only... well, not stare. She couldn't see. But... you get the point. "What does that—" She tried to ask, but her throat was still hoarse and dry, making it hard to speak. Something cold was pressed in her hands and Pomni greedily gulped down the cold water, grateful to have the liquid cool her burning throat. "What... happened?" She managed to croak out after finishing the drink.

“You got in a bad accident after the stage went cublewy!” Bubble said in their odd cheerful way. “And now you’re awake and everyone’s panicking over you going missing!”

“Wha—?”

“I’m gonna go make cake for the party now!”

“Wait-what? No! Don’t—!” Pomni started before another coughing fit hit her. God her throat was so dry. She wished Bubble gave her one more glass of water.

“Okydoky! Bye now!”

Pomni didn’t have time to react as another glass was handed to her. Pomni didn’t understand the AI, but didn’t question it much as she took her time savoring to cool drink in her hands. Once it was all gone, Pomni set the glass down and began to think.

A bad accident. That was all Bubble said. A bad accident at the stage. Pomni wasn’t sure how bad of an accident it was, and she was sure there was more to that than the brief and unhelpful explanation Bubble gave.

And what about everyone panicking? That she was missing? Oh, maybe she shouldn’t have left the room after she woke up in search for some water. She should probably head back now.

Lifting to her feet, Pomni hoped she was going the right way as she began to move. She still had no idea where she was or where she was going. She expected Bubble to pop up again and maybe show her, or, guide her in the right direction, but the AI didn’t appear.

It was a little while before her legs started to hurt and began to lose their strength when she heard it.

Voices.

Very familiar voices.

“Jax! I’m serious!” Pomni’s head perked up, hearing the familiar voice that could only belong to Ragatha. And she sounded close!

Feeling a rush of adrenaline, Pomni moved faster, hoping to catch the doll’s attention and maybe get some clear answers of what the \$%#& was going on. She could hear the voices getting clearer, noting Zooble’s quiet irritation and, ugh, Jax’s smug voice. God, she hoped Ragatha would keep Jax off her. She really didn’t want to run into him—!

The wall gave way and something collided into her, sending her tumbling to the floor.

Pain ricocheted through her whole body as her head hit the floor, flaring in agony as a sharp ringing screamed in her ears. Pomni laid there for a moment, trying to gather her bearings as she lifted her head and felt pain spike in it. “Ow.” She managed to say quietly, wanting nothing more than for this nightmare to end.

“POMNI!”

## Chapter 6

“POMNI!”

The jester didn’t have time to do anything before she was suddenly whisked off the ground and held in a bone-crushing hug. Her head ached, pulsing in an uncomfortable way as she was squeezed tightly.

“Pomni! Oh, thank *god* you’re alright!” The familiar voice of Ragatha was above her, so Pomni assumed she was the one hugging her. “We were all so worried when you went missing and were almost thinking the worst when we couldn’t find you, b-but here you are! We found you! And you’re awake! … you’re awake.”

There was a sudden dip in Ragatha’s voice as Pomni was pulled away and dangled from under her arms. Pomni didn’t know why she sounded like that, or what caused it. She wasn’t even certain what was going on at this point. “I… uh…” Pomni began but quickly stopped, feeling an itch in the back of her throat building up. She didn’t want to have a coughing fit. It hurt and she didn’t want any more pain added to the massive headache her head was already in.

“You’re… awake. You’re actually awake.” There was an odd tone in Ragatha’s voice, something Pomni couldn’t identify as her feet touched the ground. “That’s. Well, that’s great! That’s really great.” There was a nervous chuckle. “We were all getting worried. You were asleep for a while.”

“A… while?” Pomni croaked out. How long was a while? Pomni wanted to ask, but her throat was starting to hurt again and Ragatha was still speaking.

“But look at you! Up and walking about! You, you gave us quite a scare when we saw that you were missing.”

“Yeah, what the heck was that about Pomni?” Pomni flinched at the new voice, turning her head to where she assumed it came from. “Did you think it was funny to give us a heart attack?”

Pomni flinched again, but this time it was from the tone of who she could only guess was Zooble. They sounded irritated. More so than the usual casual grumpy way they normally were.

“And nearly got the blame on me for it.” Pomni jumped as Jax spoke, sounding very close. Almost as if he was speaking right next to her ear. “So cruel Pomni. And here I thought you were a *little* nice.”

“Jax! Stop it.” Ragatha’s chiding tone was of some comfort to Pomni, though feeling herself being touched and pulled close to someone was not something she enjoyed right now. “And don’t be mean Zooble.”

“What? I’m just teasing~” Pomni frowned at the casual, almost mocking tone that Jax always spoke in. “Besides, she almost got me in trouble for no reason. Sneaking off like that and making everyone worry over nothing. What a shame.”

“I didn’t-!” Pomni began to protest, trying to defend herself from Jax’s cruel teasing, but the irritation in her throat clamped down, bringing forth a harsh coughing fit that racked Pomni’s body harshly. Her knees gave out, and Pomni pitched forward, landing into something soft but firm, gripping it for dear life as the coughing fit took over, making it hard to breathe and bringing burning pain to her throat. Her head also started to pulse with pain, and she crumbled further into the soft, firm item.

God, what was wrong with her?!

Something touched her shoulders, and she felt something rubbing circles on her back, but Pomni was in too much pain to care, trying to control her coughing fit. After what seemed like forever, her fit finally receded and she could breathe again, but the lingering pain in her throat made it hard to draw in breath, and her head was killing her and the world felt like it was spinning.

And it was hot.

So very, very hot.

Had the circus always been this hot?

It was unbearable.

“Come on, Pomni. Let’s get you back to your room, okay?” A gentle voice spoke from above, kind and caring.

Pomni could only nod her head, still weak and unable to speak. She tried to stand on her own, but her legs gave out beneath her. A whine left her lips before she could stop it. She felt so weak. What was going on?

She didn’t have time to question anything before her mind started to spin and her consciousness slipped away, returning her to the blissful, dreamless slumber.

~\*~

“Pomni?” Ragatha shook the small jester’s shoulder, calling out her name a few times.  
“Pomni?”

“I don’t think she can hear you.” Zooble pointed out, having gotten closer when the jester was having a coughing fit. “She might have passed out.”

“Sheesh, bit of a heavy sleeper, isn’t she?” Ragatha and Zooble glared at Jax. “Anyway. We found her, so I guess everything’s okay now.”

Ragatha could only shake her head as she carefully lifted Pomni up as Zooble glared at Jax. The smaller being made a soft groan as Ragatha adjusted her head to lay on her shoulder,

making sure Pomni was lying comfortably against her. "Let's get you back to your room." She whispered softly, rubbing Pomni's back as she and Zooble headed back.

"At least we know why she wasn't there," Zooble commented as they walked. "She must have walked out when I was getting water for the bucket."

"You did say you took the long way around." It did make sense. Pomni had likely regained consciousness while Zooble was out and had wandered off before they got back. And when Zooble saw that Pomni was missing, they assumed Jax pulled something and went to yell at him instead of thinking that Pomni could have wandered off on her own.

At least they found her. That was all that mattered.

"So, what now?"

"We get Pomni back to her room... and maybe get a few rags wet." Ragatha noted that there was still a bit of heat coming off the small jester's body. It wasn't an alarming amount, but she could feel Pomni getting warmer as time went by.

"So we're back to babysitting the newbie. Great." The pair glared at Jax, who was following behind from a distance. "And here I thought we didn't need to anymore."

"Shut up, Jax. No one asked for your opinion." Zooble growled.

"And no one said that we didn't need to look after Pomni. She might be able to wake up, but she still needs help." Ragatha pointed out.

"Really? Well, then. Count me out."

"W-What!?" Ragatha nearly lost her hold on Pomni as she stumbled. Thankfully, Zooble managed to catch her and keep them both upright while Jax passed by with an easy grin on his face. "What do you mean?"

"I mean there's no point of me helping out anymore. You guys got that covered now that Pomni's not a dead fish. Speaking of which, I need to head back to the lake and grab a few things."

"What could you possibly need from there?" Zooble asked, but their question went unanswered as Jax left, leaving the pair standing there.

"Helpful. As always." Ragatha sighed, shaking her head. It was no use trying to get Jax to help. The rabbit did what he wanted, whenever he wanted. She had come to accept that over the years, though deep down, she wished Jax would help out. Even a tiny bit would be enough.

But that was wishful thinking, and she knew the chances of that actually happening were slim to none.

Ragatha pushed aside her disappointment, deciding that Pomni was more important right now than worrying about Jax.



The news that Pomni woke up had reached all the ears in the Digital Circus.

Caine included.

The ringmaster had been ecstatic when he learned that Pomni had awoken, but dampened slightly when he also learned that she had gone back into a coma. Still, he didn't stay dampened for long and was sure Pomni would be back on her feet in no time.

Only 'no time' meant few days later when Pomni had once again awoke when no one was around and had somehow managed to wander to the fourth floor where she promptly passed out from exhaustion and pain. There was then a unanimous argument that Pomni should not be left alone, especially with the door to her room left wide open.

That wasn't the only problem though.

It was hard to catch Pomni when she was conscious, as it was hard to tell when she was truly awake and lucid and not muttering in her sleep. Gangle had mistaken this a few times when she thought Pomni was really awake and failed to realize right away that the jester wasn't as coherent as she first assumed.

It took a few days or so before Pomni finally regained consciousness.

The poor jester was in pain as she sat up in bed, clutching her head as Kinger stared at her. And then let out a startled scream that scared them both when his mind finally registered that Pomni was awake.

"Pomni!" Ragatha threw her arms around the small jester, pulling her into a tight hug.  
"Thank god! I was starting to worry that you'd never wake up!"

"R-Ragatha?" Pomni's voice was slow and came out rough and hoarse, sounding like she hadn't spoken in years.

"I'm here, Pomni." Ragatha gently took Pomni's hands, giving them a small squeeze.  
"Everything's okay."

"W-where?"

"We're in your room. You've been out for... for a few days." Ragatha explained, feeling her heart crack a bit when Pomni tried to look around. The bandages around her head prevented the jester from seeing anything, and Ragatha wished she could take them off so that Pomni could see that she was safe. "You really had everyone worried for a while."

"Speak for yourself." A scoff came from the doorway, and Ragatha sent a small glare at Zooble.

"Z... Zoo... ble?"

“Yeah, it’s me.” Zooble gave a small wave before they remembered that Pomni couldn’t see them. “Kinger and Gangle are here too.” It took Kinger a moment to register that his name had been spoken while Gangle let out a quiet, almost silent hello.

“Hi.” Pomni managed to squeak out before groaning and lifting her hands to her throat.

“Pomni? What’s wrong?” Ragatha asked, worried for the jester as she held her hands around her where her throat would be.

“H… Hurt.” Pomni wheezed out. “T… talk… talking… hard…”

“I’ll get you some water.” Ragatha got up, leaving the room with its occupants behind. Zooble shook their head lightly, stepping into the room and going over to the bed.

“As much as a pain it was, I’m actually kind of glad that you’re awake Pomni. I was starting to think that you died or something.”

“Wha?”

“Well, actually that would be impossible as death or dying isn’t something that can happen in this digital world. Pain and losing our minds is a certainty, but achieving death would almost be like a dream!”

“Or a nightmare.” Zooble huffed, taking a seat in one of the small chairs. “But, still, it’s nice to see that you’re up. Caine’s been driving everyone crazy since the whole incident. He won’t stop rambling about having you back in performances again.”

A nervous smile crossed Pomni’s face, most likely not enjoying the idea of going back on Caine’s adventures. “Oh… g-goody.”

“Yeah, I know. It #%\$^ sucks.”

“B-But that’s okay! I’m sure Caine’s adventures w-won’t be too bad.” Gangle spoke up, standing at the end of the bed with Kinger. “His adventures have been… slightly less horrible?”

“Huh? Oh! Yes. They have.” Kinger agreed. “Less intense than Caine’s usual style. And fewer knives! I can hardly believe it!”

“None of us can. I guess the incident must have knocked a few senses in that empty head of his.”

“In… incident?” Pomni tilted her head. “W… wha… inci… in–”

“The one where you blew up, kid.” A new voice joined the conversation, one that made everyone cringe. Jax was by the doorway, leaning on the frame with his usual mean-spirited grin on his face. “Don’t tell me you forgot about it. You were blown nearly halfway across the circus in that explosion.”

“Shut up, Jax.” Zooble hissed.

“What? I’m just telling the truth here.” Jax said, not at all sorry as he continued to speak. “And it was quite messy.”

“M-Messy?” Pomni flinched, not liking what she was hearing. She didn’t have any clear memories of what happened. She could only remember there being a flash, pain, and then... nothing. Pomni wanted to understand what was going on, but at the same time, she didn’t want to know the full details.

“B-but that doesn’t matter! Y-you’re okay now!” Gangle jumped in just as Pomni started to hyperventilate. “You don’t need to worry about it now.”

“You sure about that, ribbons?” Pomni flinched at the obnoxious teasing tone that laced Jax’s words. “Pomni’s eyes are still covered, you know.”

Hearing that, Pomni touched her face. Bandages, she finally realized. There were bandages covering her face... but... “Why?” She asked. As far as she knew, no one could retain any serious or permanent damage in the Digital Circus. She had enough knives thrown at her to learn *that*.

“We... don’t know.” Kinger, who had been quiet for most of the time, finally spoke up. “This is nothing I’ve seen before.” One of his hands floated towards Pomni’s face, poking at the bandages and making the poor jester flinch. “Injuries like this have never happened before. I didn’t think anyone could get hurt like this.”

“Hurt?” Pomni cringed as her throat started to flair in pain. It was getting harder and harder to speak. “C-Caine.” A thought occurred to her, one that should have been obvious when she woke up. “Caine.” She motioned to her face. “F... fix?”

A hush fell over the room.

Everyone glanced at each other.

How could they break this gently to her?

“Uh, well,” Zooble started, unsure if they should be the one to tell Pomni this. They weren’t in any way gentle with their words as Ragatha was, and preferred to be more blunt and straight to the point than anything. “D-Don’t freak out or anything, Pomni, but—”

“He can’t.”

Zooble shot a hard glare at Jax as Pomni froze up.

“... w... what?”

“Canie can’t fix this.” Jax motioned to Pomni’s face. “We all saw it. None of his snaps can fix it.”

“What?!?” Pomni had been slightly panicking before when she realized she couldn’t see, but now learning that Caine couldn’t fix her face was sending her into a full-blown panic attack.

“Why?!” She nearly screamed but quickly went quiet as pain flared deep in her throat, causing her to start coughing.

“Don’t ask us, we don’t know.” Jax shrugged as Gangle tried to comfort Pomni by patting her back. “Must be just a you thing. Hey, do us all a favor and don’t spread it to any of us, okay?”

“It’s not a sickness, idiot! It can’t spread!”

“Unless it’s a virus! Cause if it is, THEN WE’RE NEXT!”

“It’s not a virus!”

“You sure about that? This place does have a lot of glitches. Who’s to say that Pomni didn’t catch a bad virus or something?”

“A VIRUS?!”

“Shut up, Jax!”

“I’m just speaking the truth here.”

“WE’RE GOING TO GET VIRUSES?!”

“Kinger! Shut up!”

Voices were getting louder and louder, drowning the room in noise that was too loud for Pomni’s liking. The jester’s mind was spinning, trying to make sense of everything as panic swelled inside her, ready to burst out at any given moment.

Pain, fear, anxiety, and darkness was swarming all around her. She couldn’t see any way to escape it as she was slowly pulled down and drowned under everything, her strength slipping as the air was choked out of her.

“WHAT’S GOING ON IN HERE FELLAS?!”

And just like that, the loudest voice cut through it all.

“Caine!” Kinger screeched as the ringmaster floated into Pomni’s room, disrupting the chaos and arguing with his presence. “Pomni’s awake.” The chess piece pointed at the jester, who was starting to have another anxiety attack due to the AI’s sudden appearance.

“I’VE HEARD!” Caine floated over to Pomni’s bed, hovering over the jester with what everyone could only assume was a smile on his ‘face’. It was hard to tell what Caine was expressing since his head was a large set of floating teeth with a pair of disembodied eyeballs inside his mouth. “I BUMPED INTO RAGATHA A WHILE AGO, AND SHE TOLD ME THE GOOD NEWS THAT OUR DEAR FRIEND POMNI WAS FINALLY AWAKE! HOW ARE YOU FEELING MY DEAR?”

Pomni tried to speak, to tell Caine of the pain she was in and ask why he hadn’t fixed it, but a harsh coughing fit and the burning pain in her throat prevented her from even uttering a clear

word to the AI.

“OH! WELL THAT’S NEW.” Caine lifted his hand and snapped his finger, summoning a pitcher and glass filled with ice and water, and levitated the items to Pomni. “THIS MIGHT HELP WITH THAT.”

As soon as Pomni felt the glass in her hand, she wasted no item downing the whole drink and nearly choking on the water in the process. Gangle still patted her back in sympathy as she managed to slow down and take sips.

“WELL I’M SURE YOU HAVE A FEW QUESTIONS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO HAVE ANSWERED, AND I’D BE HAPPY TO PROVIDE!” Caine said as he generously refilled Pomni’s glass with more water. “BUT I’M NOT SURE SURE IF I HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS MYSELF SINCE I... DON’T REALLY KNOW WHAT’S GOING ON EXACTLY.”

“What’d you mean?” Zooble asked as everyone stared at Caine.

“WELL, FOR STARTERS I... STILL DON’T KNOW WHAT CAUSED THIS.” Caine motioned to Pomni, specifically her face. “AND I DON’T EXACTLY UNDERSTAND WHY...” He trailed off, glancing at his hand. “ANYWAY!” He quickly turned to Pomni. “NOW THAT YOU’RE AWAKE, YOU CAN RETURN TO GOING ON ADVENTURES AGAIN!”

Pomni, who was sipping on her water, did a spit take, spraying water on Gangle’s face. “W- What?!” She exclaimed in fear as Jax laughed in the background. “Now?!”

“SURE! WELL. NOT RIGHT NOW. TODAY’S ADVENTURE HAS ALREADY CONCLUDED, SO TOMORROW AT THE EARLIEST. BUT DON’T WORRY! I PROMISE YOU THAT IT’LL A SPECTACULAR ADVENTURE THAT YOU’LL NEVER FORGET!”

“B-B-But I can’t! I-I-I!” Pomni panicked. Caine was already putting her on an adventure? Just after she regained consciousness? When she was basically blind?! “C-can you at least t-take this off?” She asked hurriedly, pointing to the bandages wrapped around her head.

“OH! OH... UH.” Caine shifted his eyes away, tapping the top of his cane. “I DON’T THINK THAT’S A GOOD IDEA POMNI. I WAS TOLD BY YOUR DOCTOR THAT YOUR FACE STILL NEEDS SOME TIME TO HEAL. BUT DON’T WORRY! I’M SURE IT’LL BE RIGHT AS RAIN IN NO TIME!”

“Doctor? Who?”

“NO, I’M AFRAID I DON’T KNOW THAT DOCTOR. BUT JAX HERE IS!” Caine reached out, extending his arm and pulling Jax towards him in a side hug. “WHO KNEW THAT OUR RESIDENT JOKESTER WAS A PROFESSIONAL DOCTOR? I SURE DIDN’T! AND BOY AM I GLAD THAT HE IS!”

“I don’t think he’s a—”

“GADZOOKS YOU’RE RIGHT JAX! WE SHOULD HAVE A PARTY TO CELEBRATE POMNI’S GRAND RECOVERY!”

“I didn’t say anything.” Jax said right as Caine dropped him on the ground.

“I’LL NEED SOME TIME TO GET THE DECORATIONS READY AND GET BUBBLE TO MAKE AN EXTRA SPECIAL CAKE FOR THE OCCASION, AND MAKE SURE THEY DON’T SET FIRE TO THE KITCHEN AGAIN. BE BACK IN A JIFF!” With that, the AI imploded on himself and disappeared, leaving everyone behind in stunned silence.

Pomni was quiet for a moment, then turned her head to Zooble. “... you’re a doctor?”

“... uuuhhhh, wrong person Pomni.”

“Why yes.” Jax grinned, reaching over and turning Pomni’s head to look at him. “Yes, I am.”

“I... highly doubt that.”

“I have a degree and everything.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“Believe what you want, I’m still the designated doctor here.” Jax said with a smug smile.

“You’re only a doctor because Caine believes that \$#\$ ‘degree’ you made is real.” Zooble pointed out.

“Eh? Jax has a what?”

“Of course it’s real. Maybe not this one, but the one back home sure is.”

“You’re not a doctor!”

“Now now, Zooble. Being angry all the time isn’t good for you.”

“#\$^% you!”

“Love you too, Zooby.” Jax teased, making the living mix-and-match being fum in rage.

Pomni quietly sipped on her drink, letting the digital water soothe the burning in her throat. Once it was bearable and she was sure she wasn’t going to hack up her lungs, she cleared her throat, waiting for Jax and Zooble to go quiet. “So, um...” She tapped a finger against the glass, fidgeting as she tried to figure out what to say. She finally settled on trying to know how long she’d been unconscious for. “How... how long was I out for?”

“A while.” Said someone.

“A few years.” Said Jax.

“What?!?” Pomni whipped her head towards Jax, feeling her heart skip a few beats. “Years?!?”

“Kiding.” Jax scoffed. “More like a month or two. You’re a pretty heavy sleeper when you’re out cold.”

Pomni frowned. A month? That... well, it wasn’t as bad as a year, but that was still a long time. “And... this?” She pointed to the bandages wrapped around her head. “Can I take off?”

“... uh, I don’t think you should, Poms.” There was a strange tone in Jax’s voice that Pomni couldn’t identify. “I think you should keep it on for a bit longer. It’s not pretty under there.”

Pomni flinched. Not pretty? Was... was her injury *that* bad?

No.

No, it was likely another prank set up by Jax. He had pulled a few mean ones on Pomni before, so it was likely that her injury wasn’t as bad as he was making it out to be. It wouldn’t surprise her if her face was fine and he was making her worry over nothing.

“Right.” She struggled to find the table, setting her glass down. “I’m just going to take this off now and—” She reached for the bandages, ready to pull them off and see the world again, no matter how crazy and insane it was.

“*DON’T!*” Pomni jumped as her hand was suddenly grabbed. She froze in shock, frightened by the scream and feeling someone holding on to her. “... I-I mean, you shouldn’t.” Her hand was released, and Pomni quickly held it to her chest. “You haven’t fully recovered yet, you know? Best to leave it alone for now.”

Everyone looked at Jax in surprise. No one had expected the rabbit to react that way.

Before anyone could say anything, Ragatha popped into the room holding a cup in her hand. “I’m back! Sorry, I had to... oh.” Ragatha spotted the glass and pitcher on the table, blinking in surprise. “I... see someone already got you some water. That’s nice! I did take a while and was worried that you might... anyway! What’s going on in here?”

“Just waiting on Caine to get us for the party.” Jax said as he stood up.

“Party? What party?”

“The party he’s throwing since Pomni’s awake now.” Zooble clarified, eyeing Jax as the rabbit casually left the room.

Ragatha gave him a small sideways glance as he passed, but decided that he wasn’t important right now. “Really? That sounds fun! We hadn’t had a party since... huh. When was the last time we had a party?”

Everyone pondered, wondering when the last party was held in the Digital Circus.

“Huh. I don’t remember.” Kinger said, blinking his eyes slowly.

“I-I think it was... a year ago?” Gangle guessed.

"I think it was longer than that," Zooble said. "Maybe two? No, three at most. God, I can't tell. It's been #%\$& forever."

"Well then, we better enjoy this party." Ragatha said with a smile, setting the cup down on the table. "It's not every day that we get to have some fun around here. We should make the most of it!"

"Is that a good idea?" Pomni asked hesitantly. She wasn't sure if going to a party so soon after she just woke up was a good idea. Especially if the party was hosted by Caine.

"Sure! The parties Caine throws are relatively harmless enough. And they're pretty enjoyable." Ragatha took a seat on the bed. "The last one can remember was nice. No knives, no crazy adventures, and the games were fun to play!"

A few murmurs of agreement went about the room, though Zooble scoffed and said something about Jax under their breath. Hearing the positive notes, and the lack of anything dangerous, Pomni felt a little bit better about the party. She still wasn't happy about going back on adventures tomorrow, but a party did sound nice.

Though, there was one problem.

Pomni lightly touched the edge of the bandage around her face, frowning as everyone discussed what they hoped to expect for the upcoming party.



An hour or so passed before Caine summoned all of them to the main area of the circus.

When everyone arrived, they were bombarded with confetti and cheery fanfare. After getting over the scare everyone took in their surroundings.

Caine had seemed to go all out, decorating the whole floor with balloons, streamers, flags, and other assortment of eye-catching decor. There were games that were set up in small places around the area, some simple and familiar while others were a bit too complicated to understand at first glance. A large table was set up, covered in delicious-looking food ranging from sweets to full-course meals that were waiting to be devoured.

Colorful lights were glowing in the air, dancing around like small fireflies. Music played from a distance, bright and happy to match the mood of the party.

Everyone gawked at the sight... except for one.

Pomni couldn't see anything. Everything around her was darkness.

The small jester had been convinced to go after everyone agreed that a party was relatively safe. She was still concerned since it was Caine who was throwing it, but decided to give it a shot since this party was meant for her after all.

Of course, it still didn't help that Pomni couldn't see and needed help getting around. Ragatha had assisted her, leading her around and helping her down the stairs. It was slightly

embarrassing to the jester that she needed help like this, but she didn't put up any fight as she really had no idea where she was going or where she was.

Pomni shivered, clutching onto Ragatha's dress tightly. She could hear all sorts of sounds, but since she couldn't see anything, her anxiety was going through the roof. The only reason she hadn't left already was Ragatha's calming presence keeping her sane. That and she had no clue on how to return to her room without help.

Maybe this won't be so bad. Everyone kept telling her that parties were nothing like adventures and there wouldn't be any traumatizing surprises waiting for her there. Plus, with how they described the few parties they could remember, they actually sounded fun.

For once, Pomni was excited to go... until she got there and realized that there was no way her for to enjoy it.

Everything sounded nice, and she could hear the others enjoying the party, but Pomni couldn't join in. She couldn't see anything or tell where she was going without Ragatha guiding her.

"Pomni?" Ragatha glanced down at the small jester, finding her clutching her dress tightly in her hands. Pomni hadn't left her side and stayed clung to the doll. Wherever Ragatha moved, Pomni followed close beside her, keeping a tight hold on her dress as she went. Ragatha didn't mind, not one bit, but she was worried for the younger girl as she hadn't spoken a word since the beginning of the party.

Reaching down, Ragatha tapped Pomni on the shoulder, causing the jester to jump and whip her head around wildly. "It's just me." Ragatha said softly, patting the top of Pomni's head.

Pomni relaxed under her touch, yet her hands still kept a tight hold on the fabric. "Oh. Sorry, did you say something?"

"No." Ragatha started to shake her head but stopped. "I was just wondering how you're enjoying the party so far."

Pomni frowned, turning her head this way and that. "... it's loud." She finally said after a moment.

"Parties are usually loud." Ragatha agreed, chuckling slightly. "But are you enjoying it? It's a pretty good party. What's not to enjoy?"

Pomni tilted her head up, staring right where she assumed Ragatha's face would be. She let one of her hands release their grip on the dress, waving it in front of her face.

"Ah. Right." Ragatha cringed. "W-Well I'm sure there's something that you can enjoy here! Let's see." She gazed around the room, trying to see if there was anything Pomni could enjoy. It occurred to her as she gazed around that there... wasn't much. Everything Ragatha could see required sight to play or enjoy and Pomni...

"How about we grab something from the snack bar?" She quickly said, spying the large buffet table. "There's lots of food there that you might enjoy."

Pomni did perk up at the sound of food. There was a little thing everyone knew about Pomni, and that was her love of food. It seemed in her old life and her new life in the Digital Circus, once she calmed down, Pomni was a bit of a foodie. She enjoyed burgers, pizza, and all assortments of greasy food, though she wasn't picky about other foods as well.

Not to mention that she was always trying to eat something right before the ringmaster summoned her out of nowhere for his performances. Food was one of Pomni's comforts, and it was one of the best ways to calm her down.

"... I... am thirsty." Pomni said after a while. "Maybe... just some punch?"

"That's the spirit!" Ragatha smiled, guiding Pomni over to the table. "Now let's see. Punch, punch, p-oh look!" Ragatha made a small hiss and cringed. "Sorry." She quickly apologized. "It seems like Bubble made a few of your favorites!"

"Really?" Pomni perked up.

"Yeah! Hamburgers. Oh, and some fries. Hotdogs. Pizza. Donuts." Ragatha kept listing off the foods, making Pomni's mouth water and tempted to reach out and grab the nearest item to bite into. "And some AH!"

Pomni flinched, pressing herself closer to Ragatha's side. What was happening? Was there something going on? DID SOMETHING BAD HAPPEN?!

"Hello~!"

"Oh, Bubble. It's just you." Ragatha sighed in relief. "You scared me for a moment there."

"Are you guys enjoying the party?" The sentient bubble asked, floating above the pair with its wide, ever-present toothy grin on its face.

"You bet! Me and Pomni were just about to enjoy some of the food here. It looks good." Pomni flinched at that. Did it? Did it really look good?

"It's made with all the love I'm legally allowed to give."

"Oh. That's... nice." Ragatha's smile was becoming strained. She didn't hate the AI. Not one bit. But Bubble's appearance made her slightly uncomfortable and she wanted Pomni to have a good time. "So, uh... oh look, is that Kinger over there?" She quickly pointed to the chess piece, who appeared to be having a conversation with Zooble about something. Possibly about bugs if anyone had to guess.

The bubble turned its gaze on Kinger, staring at the longest occupant of the Digital Circus for a while, then began to repeatedly open and close its mouth, floating slowly towards the unsuspecting chess piece.

Sensing there was about to be some chaos unfold, Ragatha quickly grabbed some plates, filling them with plenty of food, and quickly grabbed Pomni. The small girl let out a surprise squeak as she was pulled along, and Ragatha wished she could have been gentler with her, but Kinger's screaming made her pick up the pace.

Pomni could hear screaming and what sounded like a crash, picking up her speed as Ragatha pulled her away to... somewhere. Where, she didn't know, but if it was away from the growing crashes and fire alarms, she'd be happy just to be away from it all.

Ragatha didn't stop guiding Pomni till they were safe in her room, relaxing once the door was shut and the sounds were blocked out. It was a good thing Caine made all the rooms sound-proof, otherwise, Jax would have had a grand time keeping them all up at night.

"Do parties usually end with screaming?" Pomni asked as Ragatha guided her to her bed, helping her sit down on the mattress.

"No, not really. They usually end with Jax pulling something." Ragatha placed the plates on the table, moving it so it was in front of Pomni, and took a seat across from her. "And they're usually less chaotic than this." She pushed the plate gently towards Pomni, glad that she managed to swipe most of Pomni's preferred favorites in her haste. "Here, I made a plate for you. I hope you don't mind."

"Huh? Oh." Pomni slowly reached out, touching the table with her hand, and felt around. She managed a small smile when her fingers bumped into the plate, pulling it closer and grabbing the first thing she could feel. Her teeth bit down on soft bread and crunchy vegetables, feeling the savory juices of meat hit her tongue. She had to admit. Bubble was a pretty good cook if they could make digital food taste this good. It was so good, she could almost forget the burning in the back of her throat.

Almost.

Pomni tried to ignore it, trying to savor the juicy burger in her hands and not acknowledge the growing discomfort in the back of her mouth. But after a few bites, she couldn't ignore it anymore.

"Pomni?" Ragatha noted that the jester was reaching a hand towards her neck, making a quiet whine that sounded like she was in pain. Pomni had mentioned her throat had felt like it was burning when she awoke, and she had chugged down at least ten glasses of water before it went away. Ragatha worried that the pain might be back, so she grabbed the pitcher and glass Caine had left behind, pouring water into the cup, and held it out for Pomni. "Here."

It took Pomni a moment to find the glass, and once she did, she down the entire drink. "Thanks." She muttered, wiping her mouth.

"No problem." Ragatha beamed, though inside she was quite worried. She had noted that Pomni still gave off a bit of heat when she was outside her room. It wasn't hot or as intense as when she first discovered it, but it still worried Ragatha that Pomni might not be fully healed yet.

The jester had stumbled a bit when she walked, and Ragatha noted that she seemed to be out of breath when they arrived at the party and when they escaped. She hoped Pomni would heal quickly now that she was awake, but it seemed she was wrong. Pomni wasn't physically ready to be thrown back into Caine's adventures, and Ragatha worried that it might be too much for her. "Pom—"

"What's going on over here ladies?"

The heckles on the back of Ragatha's neck went up, and irritation flashed on her face as she whirled around and glared at Jax. "Jax! What are you doing here?"

"What? Can't I visit my two favorite people?"

"We both know that's a lie." Ragatha huffed as Jax stepped into the room, noting that he had a plate of his own. "And you didn't answer my question."

"Pretty sure I did." Jax said smugly, plopping himself down on Pomni's bed and making the jester squeak in surprise. "I noticed that you two were sneaking off and thought I could join in on the fun."

"There's... nothing fun going on." Pomni said, scooting away from Jax.

"Well, there wasn't until I showed up."

"Jax, we're just trying to have a peaceful dinner here. Can you not be... you." Ragatha said as she watched Jax pick up some food and shove it into his mouth. Crumbs fell from his face and littered Pomni's bed, and Ragatha wished she could reach over and strangle him for leaving a mess.

"I don't think I understand what you're trying to say here dollface." Jax shot her a smug look, biting into a croissant.

"Jax, can please leave?" Pomni tried asking, feeling uncomfortable with the rabbit around.

"Why Pomni, I'm hurt." Jax placed a hand on his chest. "After all I've done to help you, this is how you treat me? I even brought you a peace offering as well." He pulled a slice of pizza off from his plate, dropping it onto Pomni's plate.

"I don't... what do you mean all you've done to help me?" Pomni turned her head, hoping she was looking at Jax. "Everyone told me that you were just using me as an excuse to not be on the adventures."

"Well, yeah. At first." Jax popped a grape into his mouth. "But then I realized how boring it was to watch over someone who sleeps all the time and makes the room feel like a sauna. Oh," He paused before he could bite down on a cracker covered in peanut butter. "And by the way, don't ever do that again." He pointed the cracker at Pomni's face, close enough that one of the corners poked her and left a bit of peanut butter on her face. "If you get caught up in an explosion and get hurt like that again, I'm going to find a way to kill you, resurrect you, and

then kill you again. Because it was a hassle to keep you cool the whole time and majorly boring since I couldn't pull any pranks when I was watching over you.”

“I... um.”

“Jax, lay off. It’s not Pomni’s fault with what happened to her.” Ragatha sighed. She could feel that her appetite had been ruined and wanted nothing more than for the rabbit to leave.

Pomni was quiet for a while, nervously tapping her fingers against her hand as she wondered how to diffuse this before Jax did anything to rile up Ragatha to the point of snapping. A thought occurred to her just then, something she had overheard from Zooble and Ragatha as they were talking from a while ago. “Hey, Jax? Why didn’t you let anyone see me?”

“Wha?” Jax glanced at Pomni, holding a hotdog that had too many condiments on it and a little irked that Pomni had stopped him before he could bite into it.

“You didn’t let anyone see me. When you told Caine that you were a ‘doctor’ and got back.” Jax’s eyes slowly widened as Pomni spoke. “Why was that?”

“Oh, that?” He darted his eyes away, putting on an easy grin. “I just saw it as a good opportunity to get out from going on adventures. I wasn’t going to let dollface or anyone else steal a golden opportunity like that from me.”

“Then why did you stay with me and not in your room?” Jax froze. “You could have just been in your room the whole time or pulling pranks without needing to stay by me. It couldn’t have been that serious. I mean, I don’t even know if you were there the whole time, so—”

“*Lay off Pomni!*” The jester flinched, taken back. Jax sounded... angry.

“Jax!” Ragatha jumped in surprise. Jax had never snapped at anyone like that before, so it took her off guard to see him so... tense.

Jax looked between the pair, his square eyes darting between Ragtha’s concerned face and Pomni’s shaking form. He took a breath, holding it for a moment, and let it out slowly. “... I couldn’t.” He said after a moment. “It was too much of a risk to just... look, Caine put me in charge of watching over you while you were out of it, and there was no way for me to just ditch in case he ever popped in to check on you. Yeah, I could have gotten someone else to do it because it was *so boring*, but... you know.” He stuffed the hotdog into his mouth, quietly chewing as Ragatha looked at him in surprise.

She hadn’t expected that. She hadn’t even expected Jax to react that way. The rabbit looked tense and on edge, with none of his usual cocky and smug personality he usually had over himself.

She began to wonder if there was something more that the rabbit was trying to hide from them.

"So, what do you think tomorrow's adventure will be?" Ragatha asked, hoping that something more casual and less... depressing, could lighten the tense mood. "Hopefully something fun, right?"

"Sure." Jax scoffed, biting into a pretzel.

"I... guess?" Pomni shrugged. "I mean, it'll be something easy since I can't see. With the bandage over my eyes, I mean." Pomni touched her face, and Ragatha swore she almost saw a flash of something in Jax's eyes. "Are we... sure I can't take this off? I kind of want to see something other than darkness the whole time."

"Does your head still hurt?" The pair were surprised when Jax spoke up.

"Uh... yes?"

"Then you can't take it off."

"Why not?"

"Because I said so. Doctor's orders."

"You're not a doctor."

"My degree says otherwise."

"You made a fake degree Jax."

"You don't know that. You can't see it."

"Zooble said you wrote it in crayon!"

"It still eligible to read."

"They literally said that it's just squiggle lines! It's not eligible at all!"

"How can you tell? You can't even see it."

"That's because I have bandages over my face!"

"Hm, debatable."

"I literally have bandages over my face Jax! You can see them!"

"Still debatable."

Ragatha sighed softly as the pair continued to argue. She hoped that tomorrow, things would get better.

## Chapter 7

It was official.

Pomni was in heck.

The moment it was morning, Caine had thrown them all back to adventuring.

Today's adventure?

Tricycle knife juggling.

On a tripwire.

Around the whole Digital Circus.

Just.

For.

HER.

Pomni was screaming inwardly, and very loudly outwardly, as she was suddenly balancing one foot on the seat of the small vehicle, handed a bunch of items to juggle, and Caine boastfully cheering her on.

All in a span of five seconds before she fell off.

And again.

And again.

And again.

“Caine? Maybe this isn’t such a good idea.”

“NONSENSE! IT’S A WONDERFUL IDEA, MY DEAR RAGATHA! POMNI JUST NEEDS SOME PRACTICE IS ALL!”

“W-well, yes. But maybe she should do something a little more... simple? And less high? She just woke up after all, so—”

“SO SHE NEEDS TO GET BACK INTO THE SWING OF THINGS!” Caine said cheerily, and Pomni could only scream on the inside as she felt Caine lift her up like a wet noodle cat and try to plop her on the tricycle. The moment he let go of her, Pomni could feel herself already growing unsteady on her leg. It didn’t help when Caine snapped items into her hands, which added extra unnecessary weight. She knew she was going to topple over before she even felt herself begin to tip.

“OOP!” Her body jerked to a halt, and she was settled carefully to the floor. “HMM. YOU MIGHT BE MORE OUT OF SWING THAN I REALIZED, POMNI. BUT DON’T WORRY! YOU’LL BE BACK TO PERFORMING LIKE YOUR OLD SELF IN NO TIME!”

Pomni made a soft groan, feeling her head get dizzy as she sat there. There was a dull pulsing ache that acted up every so often. Pomni thought it would have gone away by now, but to her surprise, she was still in pain.

Not at any agonizing levels, thank goodness, but still enough that it was hard to ignore.

And it was still so dark.

“Caine, maybe you should hold back on putting Pomni back into any performances for the time being. And adventures. She’s still recovering and that takes time to—”

“HOLD BACK?! FROM ADVENTURES?! NONSENSE! ADVENTURES ARE MEANT TO BE FUN AND THRILLING! WITH A DASH OF DANGER TO MAKE IT EVEN MORE EXCITING!”

“But Pomni’s not ready for that! She can’t even see!” Pomni cringed at that. “How can someone go on an adventure if they can’t even see what’s two inches in front of their face?”

“AH-!” There was a moment of silence. Caine had likely froze. He usually did that when he didn’t have a direct answer. Something Pomni picked up on when she tried prying answers out of him during one of the few rare moments she could get him alone. She could never get a clear answer for him.

“You... you did take that into consideration... right? That she won’t be able to know where she’s going?”

“I... HMM.” Pomni could feel eyes boring into her, making her feel small under their gaze. “... WELL, I SUPPOSE I DID OVERLOOK THAT LITTLE PROBLEM.” She could feel the air shift in front of her face, making her flinch back. “AND I’VE... NEVER ENCOUNTERED A HUMAN HAVING A... UNIQUE PROBLEM IN THE DIGITAL CIRCUS BEFORE.”

Unique problem? Pomni thought it was more than a simple or unique problem if her face was covered in *bandages*.

“HM. THIS BRINGS UP A FEW PROBLEMS FOR FUTURE ADVENTURES.”

“And... performances?”

“I’LL HAVE TO ADJUST A FEW THINGS TO MAKE THE ADVENTURES MORE FUN! BUT STILL ADDRESSING THE SMALL PROBLEM THAT OUR DEAR FRIEND POMNI HAS.”

“And performances?”

“HOW ABOUT A FIND A CERTAIN OBJECT IN THE BOTTOM OF THE DIGITAL LAKE?!”

“She still can’t see! She wouldn’t even know where it is!”

“OH RIGHT. HM. THIS MIGHT BE A BIT HARDER THAN I THOUGHT. WHAT DO YOU THINK POMNI?”

Pomni flinched. Was Caine talking to her? Oh god, she hoped not. Her throat hurt and she just wanted to go back to her room.

Her nice, quiet, cool, dark, terrifyingly empty room.

“NOW WHAT’S WITH THE FACE, MY DEAR?” Hands grabbed her from under her arms, lifting her up and setting her down on her feet. “AREN’T YOU EXCITED TO BE BACK TO DOING ADVENTURES?”

... excited? Excited? EXCITED?!

He expected her to be EXCITED to do these TERRIFYING ADVENTURES?!

Pomni opened her mouth, ready to scream how she was NOT excited going back on these adventures nor had any desire to do so, but her throat burned with pain before she could utter a single word out. Her hand flew up to her neck, struggling to breathe as her throat seized and squeezed and burned.

God, why did everything burn?!

“OH! OH... I... SEE. THAT’S... HM. THAT’S GOING TO BE ANOTHER PROBLEM THAT I... HADN’T CONSIDERED.”

Hands touched her back, and Pomni deeply wished that she wasn’t being touched. She wished everything was back to normal or, no, that this whole entire nightmare would end already and for her to wake up in the real world and that she would have no memories of this crazy place whatsoever.

“You see what I mean about her not being ready? She can’t even speak without pain.”

“I... I SUPPOSE YOU’RE RIGHT RAGATHA. WHICH IS QUITE A SHAME. THE AUDIENCE WAS LOOKING SO FORWARD TO HAVING POMNI BACK IN THE SHOW! THOUGH, NOW THAT I THINK OF IT, I HAVE TO REARRANGE A FEW ADVENTURES TO FIT WITH POMNI’S PROBLEM.”

Again with the whole problem.

It was like they were treating this as a mere distraction or treating her like a broken object!

... which she... kind of was at the moment.

“Come on Pomni, let’s get you back to your room.” Pomni didn’t protest as Ragatha led her away. It felt odd being led around a place she could once see but now couldn’t. It was odd and out of place for her, just like when she first arrived at the Digital Circus. But somehow even more terrifying.

Pomni let out a whimper, hearing Caine address the rest of the crew about something. She couldn’t make out what as Ragatha guided her further and further away. Back to her room.

Back to the cold that banished away the heat.

Back to the loneliness that awaited her.

Back to the darkness that was trying to swallow her whole.



Ragatha wasn’t sure what she could do.

Pomni had been strangely quiet once they reached her room, and hadn’t spoken a word, even after a few glasses of water. The jester had simply hidden herself under her sheets and hadn’t moved since.

And this put Ragatha in a bit of a conflict.

She wanted to help Pomni, but she didn’t know what to do. No one had ever been hurt like this before, and she had been in the Digital Circus for a long time. Second longest next to Kinger, but still long enough. She didn’t know anything about incidents like this, nor what to do.

And Pomni? Pomni was... well, she was a lot of things.

Scared, shy, quiet, anxiety-riddled, stubborn, cowardly, nice, timid, paranoid, and high-strung, as well as a few other things. Even after some time had passed, Pomni just kept surprising everyone. She wasn’t mean. Far from it. Though, she did have trouble speaking up and saying whatever was on her mind.

At least she got along with everyone. Most of the time. She and Gangle got along fairly well. Their personalities made the pair hit it off just fine. Ragatha was sure she and Pomni were somewhat friends. The first day still hung over the pair, but Ragatha could understand why Pomni did it. Anyone would have in her shoes. She was certain Kinger would have.

There was an on-and-off sort of friendship between the jester and the chess piece, but it wasn’t bad. Zooble was indifferent to Pomni, and the jester tried to stay out of their way whenever they were particularly irritated. And Jax?

Poor Pomni was just another target for his pranks.

Her high-strung and easily timid personality made her an easy target for Jax to pull the meanest pranks. Just like poor Gangle. Though, unlike Gangle, Pomni could have rare moments of talking back and defending herself. She even once bit Jax on the arm just to get

him to stop throwing her into The Void, and wouldn't let go until he swore never to do it again.

It was surprising to find out just how sharp Pomni's teeth could get when she finally let go and they saw the bite marks she left behind. And the surprising jaw strength she had when Jax tried to shake her off and she held on for almost an hour. The bite mark she left behind had looked painful, and even Caine was surprised when he saw it.

And Caine... well, everyone had an interesting relationship with the AI.

They were scared, confused, and slightly on guard around him, especially when he sent them on terrifying adventures, but Caine wasn't evil. The AI was polite and friendly, if not a bit wacky and over the top most of the time. But he wasn't evil.

He was nice to Kinger, polite to Ragatha, and even fixed Gangle's mask whenever it broke. And Pomni...

Pomni was afraid of him.

It was clear on her face how she felt about the AI. She didn't hate him. She disliked him, but she didn't outright hate him. Yet Pomni never really spoke much to the AI unless he was speaking to her or she tried to say or needed him for something. If anything, she'd try to avoid Caine as much as possible, though Caine didn't seem to realize this at all.

And here Ragatha was trying to figure out how to help her with something she didn't know how to.

Ragatha had never got injuries like this, nor had anyone else. Pomni's injuries were something new and strange, and Ragatha worried that Pomni might be taking it harder than she let on. She wanted to help the jester, but with no knowledge of how to deal with this, it was hard.

But there had to be something she could do. There just had to! She couldn't let Pomni wallow in misery like this forever! There had to be at least something she could do.

Ragatha pondered as she looked around the room, gazing her eye at the decor and items before landing on the festival prizes Pomni had managed to win from the Digital Carnival. An idea suddenly popped into Ragatha's head, moving out of the room and went straight for hers.

She went over to a small chest where she kept things, rooting around for a while till her arms were full of the prizes she won alongside Zooble. Kinger had been nice enough to return them to her, and now Ragatha had a chance to give them to Pomni. She wasn't sure how Pomni would feel about it, but she hoped that the jester would appreciate the sentiment.

"Pomni?" Ragatha quietly moved towards the bed. She didn't want to startle the jester and stress her out even more, so she sat down at the end of the bed, adjusting each prize in her arms before calling out softly to Pomni again. "Pomni? Are you awake?"

There was no reply. Pomni didn't move or acknowledge Ragatha, though she knew the smaller woman was awake.

"I have something that might cheer you up a bit." Ragatha continued, hoping Pomni would be interested. "Well, a few somethings. Me and Zooble got them a while back and thought that maybe they could cheer you up a bit."

The blanket shifted. Ragatha waited patiently as Pomni's head slowly emerged from beneath the covers.

A small smile came on Ragatha's face as she set the prizes down on the bed, putting them where Pomni could reach. It took a moment before Pomni moved again, pulling out one of her arms to feel around. She flinched when her fingers brushed one of the prizes, slowly reaching out and feeling it before pulling it closer. Pomni stared, or, well, pointed her head towards the prize, using her hands to feel it.

"... what is it?" She finally spoke after a minute.

"It's a toy!" Ragatha happily answered, glad that Pomni was speaking again. "I think it's supposed to be a bull... and a dog... and a tiger I guess?" She stared uncertainly at the toy in Pomni's hands, unsure of how to describe it. "I really don't know what it is exactly. But it looks cute!" Ish.

Pomni nodded her head slowly. "Oh." She set the toy down, reaching for another prize. "And this one?"

"I think it's supposed to be some sort of fish?" It had fins, but Ragatha couldn't help but feel that it wasn't *exactly* a fish. And she refrained from telling Pomni the whole details as she was pretty sure the jester didn't want to know what the appearance looked like.

Pomni nodded, setting the... fish down, and reached for another prize to feel.



Caine was an enigma.

It was hard to tell what the AI was thinking most of the time, and what he might do at a moment's notice.

He was sporadic, often doing things at random, or often glitching. There was no telling what he might do or what he had cooked up for the day's adventure. Everyone basically agreed that he was too random to make any sense.

So it was surprising when he had everyone skip the adventure and insist on showing Pomni around the Digital Circus the very next morning.

"What?!" Zooble cried out when they learned this. "Why?"

"Not that I'm complaining about taking a break from your adventures, Caine, but what's this all about?" Jax asked.

"IT HAS OCCURRED TO ME OF RECENT EVENTS THAT THERE MIGHT BE A FEW DIFFICULT CHALLENGES TO OUR GOOD FRIEND POMNI. AND WITH HER CURRENT... CONDITION," Pomni frowned. "A FEW OF THE ADVENTURES I HAD PLANNED AREN'T QUITE SUITED FOR HER UNIQUE HANDICAP. AND I'LL NEED SOME TIME TO ADJUST THEM, BUT DON'T WORRY MY LITTLE SUPERSTARS! THINK OF THIS AS AN EXPLORATION ADVENTURE!"

Several groans sounded out.

"NOW, NOW, NOW. I KNOW HOW MUCH ALL OF YOU WOULD RATHER GO ON A REAL ADVENTURE, BUT WORRY NOT! THE ADVENTURES SHALL RETURN WHEN I HAVE FINISHED ADJUSTING THEM! IN THE MEANTIME, I EXPECT ALL OF YOU TO HELP POMNI FIND HER WAY ALL AROUND THE DIGITAL CIRCUS! WE CAN'T HAVE HER WANDERING OFF SOMEWHERE SHE'S NOT SUPPOSED TO BE!"

"Wander? I can't even *see* anything! How can I even wander off?!" Pomni shrieked. She felt slightly humiliated over the recent events, especially since it all revolved around her and the incident. But a part of her felt like she was being treated as a child. Sure she couldn't see, but she was a grown woman! How could she wander off?!

"Well, since you can't see anything, you could accidentally go through a random door or take the wrong path or even get your directions mixed up since you won't be able to see any familiar landmarks that could direct you to where you need to go."

Pomni flinched at that.

That... did make sense.

"... o-oh." Pomni fiddled with her fingers, suddenly feeling very self-conscious. Kinger made a good point, a terrifying one at that. Pomni could already imagine herself walking through a random open door and getting lost inside with no clue on how to get out. "That's... that's a good point."

"... a good what?" Pomni wished she could remove the bandages and shot Kinger a look.

"ANY WHO, I'LL LEAVE IT UP TO YOU TO SHOW POMNI AROUND WHILE I MAKE A FEW ADJUSTMENTS TO THE ADVENTURES! IT SHOULDN'T TAKE ME... TOO LONG. MAYBE A DAY OR TWO AT BEST, BUT DON'T WORRY YOUR LITTLE HEADS! I'VE SET UP SOMETHING SPECIAL IN CASE YOU EVER FEEL THE ITCHING URGE OF ADVENTURE IN YOUR DIGITAL SKIN!"

"Annnnd where exactly is it?" Jax asked. "I want to know which area I need to avoid for the next couple of days."

"THAT'S FOR YOU AND EVERYONE ELSE TO FIND OUT, JAX! I'VE HIDDEN IT SOMEWHERE INSIDE THE TENT AND I GUARANTEE IT'LL BE A BLAST WHEN YOU FIND IT!"

“Grrreeeeeat, just what we need.” Jax said, his voice dripping with sarcasm in every word. Pomni wasn’t sure if she should be worried or not about that.

“NOW GOOD LUCK! AND HAVE FUN, MY LITTLE SUPERSTARS!” There was a sort of POOF sound that Pomni began associating with Caine when he appeared and disappeared.

There was a moment of silence before someone spoke up, and to Pomni’s dismay, it was Jax. “Well this is new.”

“Jax.” Ragatha started with a scolding tone in her voice.

“What? It is. I’m just stating the facts here.” He let out a sort of chuckle. “Anyway, do you guys want to grab something to eat?”

“Actually, I’m going to guide Pomni around for a bit.” Pomni flinched as a hand touched her shoulder. “Caine said that we should show her around, so that’s what I’m going to do.”

“How can you even show her around? She can’t even see anything.” Why does everyone keep pointing that out?

“W-Well, okay, she can’t. But she can have a mental map of the place! I’m sure we can make a certain path Pomni can remember to take in case she’s ever on her own to get to whatever she’s trying to go to.” Pomni felt her heart stop a bit. In case she’s ever on her own? Did that mean Pomni wouldn’t have someone looking out for her all the time? To make sure she didn’t get into any danger? Or fall down somewhere where she couldn’t get out?

“Oh? You’re not gonna mama bear her and keep an eye on her the whole time?”

“I’m not a *mama bear*. I’m just helping Pomni have a bit of independence in case she ever finds herself on her own. The Tent isn’t exactly... you know.”

“Oh I know, I’m just surprised that you’re willing to let Pomni out of your sight. Are you wanting to get her in trouble?”

“Ugh! You’re impossible Jax!” Ragatha growled, and for the hundredth time today, Pomni flinched as something grabbed her hand. “Come on, Pomni. Let’s walk around a bit and get you familiarized with a few paths.” Ragatha gently squeezed her hand, and Pomni had to fight back the instinct to pull away.

She didn’t like being touched. Something about physical contact from someone made her hair stand up and her skin itch in an uncomfortable way. The feeling grew worse every time someone touched her without any consent, and she felt sick in the stomach the longer someone kept in contact with her. She had to remind herself every time some of the nicer beings here who touched her didn’t intend anything mean, and that she hadn’t told anyone that she disliked to be touched.

It only got bad when Jax kept throwing her into The Void, both as a prank and as a way to get Caine’s attention when they needed him for something. She had panicked, and the

uncomfortable feeling combined with having enough of Jax messing with her, she just acted without thinking.

“Come on, Pomni. Let’s walk for a bit.” Ragatha’s sweet voice soothed some of Pomni’s nerves, but not enough as they began walking. “Let’s start with something easy for you to remember so you can have an easier time knowing where you are. Like the dorms!”

Pomni was pretty sure she could remember the dorms. She had been able to see before, and she could still visualize how it looked. The red carpet floor, the many doors that lined the walls, the hanging pictures that were confusing to look at.

*Her horrible first impression when she, Ragatha, and Jax went to look for Kaufmo and found a large, glitching dark mass with multiple colored eyes all over its body towering over them and tried to smash her into the ground as she ran and left Ragatha behind—*

“Pomni?”

Pomni flinched, noticing that her hands were shaking. “S-sorry.” She quickly said, trying to get her hands to stop shaking. That was a while ago. She should have been over it by now. She apologized, twice, why did she feel so guilty?

“It’s alright. I can imagine a bit how stressful this all is for you.” Ragatha gave her hand a squeeze, and Pomni wished her body didn’t freeze up and that sickening feeling in her stomach would go away. *Ragatha was being nice, she chanted in her mind. She’s just helping you. You don’t need to act like she’s going to hurt you. Stop being such a big coward!*

“Alright, here we are.” Pomni almost tripped when they came to a stop, but she managed to stay upright. “So, how exactly are we going to do this.” She wasn’t sure if Ragatha was talking to her or to herself.

Pomni hoped she wasn’t talking to her. She had no idea what they were doing.

“How about we walk up and down the hall until you can familiarize how many steps you’ve taken? That sounds like a good start.” Was it? Pomni wasn’t sure. But then again, she wasn’t sure how she was going to navigate the Digital Circus now that she couldn’t see. And what she could remember, there were a few places she wanted to avoid at any and all costs.

~\*~

Pomni wasn’t enjoying this.

Walking up and down the hallway proved to be inefficient. She kept forgetting how many steps she took to reach one end of the hallway to the other end. She kept bumping into walls when she tried to walk on her own, and she had no sense of direction when she couldn’t even tell if her room was on her right or left.

To sum it up, Pomni was sure that she couldn’t find her way around this place. She couldn’t even do it when she COULD see.

“This is hopeless.” The jester bemoaned, hugging her knees to her chest.

"Oh don't be like that. I'm sure you'll get the hang of it! You just, you just need some practice, that's all!"

"We've been practicing for almost four hours now, and I still don't know where my door is!" Pomni bemoaned. She had gotten the doors mixed up more than once, and it was starting to frustrate her to no end. Sighing into her legs, Pomni touched the bandages around her head. She wished she could take this off. "... can... can we call it quits for now? My head kinda hurts."

"Oh, s-sure! Of course." Hands touched her arm, and Pomni managed not to flinch as Ragatha helped her up. A sudden wooziness hit her as she stood, feeling her head start to pound. Ragatha was saying something, but Pomni couldn't make out what she was saying.

She sounded... muffled. Like she was speaking underwater.

Or maybe.

Maybe Pomni was underwater.

She felt like she was drifting.

Drifting in a sea of darkness that had no end or beginning.

Her limbs felt heavy, numb, and out of place as she slowly drifted towards the unknown.

Her mind went into a daze, trying to figure out what was going on, but came up blank as her thoughts also drifted.

All she could grasp was that she felt like she was drifting... or maybe she was falling?

She felt like she was going down, but it seemed slow and endless.

Where was she going?

How far will she go?

Could she stop?

Should she stop?

It was all so... numb.

"Pomni!" Pomni jolted to awareness, feeling something touching her shoulders. "Pomni?!"

"W-wha?" The jester tried to move away, but her limbs felt like they were made of jelly and too heavy at the same time. What happened?

"Pomni?" Someone called to her, and it took Pomni a while to realize who it was.

"R-Ragatha?"

“Oh, THANK GOD!” Pomni was suddenly pulled up and into a bone-crushing hug. “Thank God! I was so worried!”

“What–?” Pomni began but was hit by another dizzy spell. She felt hands touching her face and this time she was alerted to how warm she felt. Too warm. It almost felt like she was burning up.

“I knew it.” Ragatha hissed. “I knew it was too soon for you to be up and about. How are you feeling? Can you hear me? Are you in any pain? Should I go get Caine?”

“No!” Pomni reacted without thinking, jolting away. She did not want Caine here. If anything the AI would make things worse than better. She tried to stand, but her legs wouldn’t respond. She let out a strained whine, trying to get up as best she could, but her limbs had minds of their own, and her strength was gone from them. And it was warm. Everything was too warm.

“Pomni?” Ragatha’s soft voice made her freeze. Oh god, she forgot the doll was even there. “Do... do you need some help?”

No.

No, she didn’t want help.

She could get up on her own.

She was fine.

She was fine.

She. Was. FINE.

“Yes.” She said in a low, almost quiet whisper, feeling too weak to deny Ragatha the help she was offering. Soft fabric hands hooked under her arms, lifting her up to her feet. Her legs shook when she tried to stand on her own, but her knees gave out beneath her, and she tumbled into Ragatha’s dress.

“Oh Pomni.” She could feel her head being patted, and Pomni felt more and more like a small child. “Come on, let’s get you to your room.” Pomni didn’t say anything as Ragatha helped her reach her living quarters.



She couldn’t sleep.

Sleep wasn’t a required necessity in this world, yet she and the other humans trapped here often engaged in it because it felt normal. Familiar.

Safe.

None of it felt safe as Pomni laid on her bed, feeling the cool gusts of air pouring over her body. The AC was a nice touch, and Pomni had to admit that it felt nice. Nice enough to almost fall asleep to, but her mind was in too much of a jumble of the day's events.

Apparently, she had collapsed earlier due to her body being overheated and her own exhaustion. She hadn't been out for too long, though it was concerning that Pomni hadn't even noticed how warm she was getting. She wondered how she could have missed something so obvious.

But she also thought back to the earlier conversation. Back when Caine tried to put her on a new performance, Ragatha insisted that she wasn't ready, Caine overlooking her condition and the obvious problem that wrapped around her face. And the worst of it all was that everyone was treating her as a fragile item instead of a normal living being.

Yes, she could understand why. She was partially blind at the moment thanks to the bandages that were wrapped around her head. But she didn't particularly like it as now all she could see was pitch black darkness. And it was terrifying.

Pomni didn't like being in the dark. There was nothing to see and it hid away unknown horrors that felt like they were waiting to grab her and made her feel on edge for her own safety. Not to mention how she kept bumping into things or tripping over items she couldn't even avoid. It was a mess. She was terrified over how long she was stuck like this and wondered if this was her new life now.

Rolling on her bed, Pomni flinched when she felt something bump against her face. Reaching around, her hand came upon something soft. Examining it through touch, Pomni realized it was one of the prizes Ragatha had given her. It was a bear... or an octopus? A rabbit? Pomni wasn't sure as she felt the item.

Sitting up on the bed, Pomni pondered on what to do. She couldn't sleep, not that she wanted to, and she had no desire to sit around and do nothing. She couldn't explain it, but Pomni felt oddly claustrophobic and energetic at the same time, wanting to go out and explore, which wasn't something she usually wanted.

Not unless she was looking around for an exit.

Plenty of times she was told that there was no exit, as everyone had looked and hadn't found anything that could lead them back to their old life. She was told how useless it was to look and that it was pointless to keep trying, but her mind kept spinning with thoughts of freedom. Towards a life that she once had and possibly a home that was waiting for her return.

Pomni couldn't remember what her life was like before, or even her own name, her REAL name, but she was sure that she could have it all back once she found a way to get out of here. She was certain of it. She just needed to find it.

*But should I? Her mind whispered. I can't even see my own hand in front of my face. How can I find an exit to get out of here? I'd get lost before I could find a way to get out.*

She hugged the prize close to her chest, feeling her heart race inside her.

*But if I don't try, how can I manage to get out of here? I don't want to live in this digital nightmare for the rest of my life going on crazy adventures or doing terrifying performances that'll end with me Abstracting sooner or later. I want to go back to my old life, back to the real world and far away from all of... THIS! I don't want to be in another performance or thrown into another adventure that leaves emotional scars. I want to go home. My REAL home. And I'm not letting this stop me!*

Feeling her resolve strengthen, Pomni slid out of bed, fumbling around to find the door. Once she found the door handle and stepped outside, a few things suddenly hit her.

She realized that she had no idea where she was going to look, nor know where she already covered in her search. Everything was dark, and she had no clue where she could go or which way to start. She couldn't even see the hallway she walked and ran, and panicked in. It was all so dark, with nothing to guide her.

Maybe she should get someone and... no. No, she couldn't do that. Pomni wasn't a little girl who needed someone to guide her. She was a woman who could do things on her own, even without sight.

Plucking up her courage, Pomni quietly stepped outside, keeping one hand on the wall as she walked. She wasn't sure where she was walking to, but she felt a little secure having a wall to her side. Open air was more terrifying than she realized, and having something solid beside her calmed most of her worries down as she walked.

Her confidence also grew as she walked, though Pomni wasn't sure if she should be glad that she hadn't run into anything or tripped over something at this point and no closer to finding an exit. She was sure she wasn't in the dorms anymore. The doors she touched didn't have signs on them and the path started to zigzag.

It was a start, but that was all she had at the moment. There wasn't anything indicating where she was or where she was going, but Pomni went on. She tried not to think too much as she walked, listening to her footfalls and the steady rhythm of her heart to keep her calm.

It was so... quiet.

Pomni hadn't realized how quiet the circus could be. She couldn't hear any sound aside from her footfalls and her racing heart.

As she thought about it, Pomni's hand felt a door. One that made the jester pause.

It felt like a door. She could feel the grooves of a door frame under her fingers, but it felt colder. Stiffer. Almost as if...

Pomni pressed her arm where her skin was exposed, feeling with it. Cold metal touched her, and she shivered from the contact, quickly pulling away.

She'd never encountered a metal door before, not could she recall seeing one when she first entered this place. Maybe. Maybe this was her chance to turn her luck around!

Pressing her hand back on the door, she felt around for the knob. It took her a while before she felt something, though it wasn't what she expected. It felt like a wheel, attached to the center of the door. She gave it a few tugs, but it wouldn't budge. Frowning, she placed the prize, which she only now realized she took with her, on the floor and grabbed the wheel with both her hands, trying to jimmy it to turn.

It took some effort, but the wheel began to spin after some tugging, which then began to spin before it stopped with a click. Pomni tugged on the door, expecting it to open, yet the door remained closed. She yanked and pulled and tugged, but the door remained firmly shut. She kept at it for a while before her strength failed her.

Panting, Pomni let go of the wheel, catching her breath, and leaned against the door... which swung open as soon as she placed herself against it.

A startled cry left Pomni's lips, suddenly caught off blanched and flailing her arms about as her body pitched forward.

Forward into darkness as she fell.

Forward into the depths as she struggled through the air.

Forward into an unknown place, where no one knew where she was.

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was strange.

Waking up and knowing there wasn't going to be an adventure today. It was odd, but welcoming. Many of them took the chance to have a day off, relaxing for once what could have been forever.

However, as time passed, everyone started to notice that there seemed to be a lack of a certain someone. Ragatha had noted that Pomni hadn't left her room, and wanted to check on her, but the other day's events and how Pomni completely shut down on any conversation she tried to have with the jester made her hang back.

Pomni hadn't taken it well when they tried to familiarize her steps in the sleeping quarters. The poor jester kept bumping into things and getting frustrated when she got the doors wrong. What was even worse was when she collapsed from heat exhaustion, and Ragatha worried that she had gone back into a coma.

"If you're worried about her, then go check on her already."

"What? I-I'm not worried! Nope! Everything's fine here." Ragatha chuckled nervously, darting her eye away as she sipped on her tea.

Zoobile scoffed. "Suuure you aren't. You're *clearly* not worried and it's *clearly* not showing on your face."

"... is it that obvious?"

"What do you think?"

Ragatha put her cup down with a sigh. "I'm sorry, it's just. Yesterday didn't turn out the way that I hoped."

"Oh yeah? Did she run off on you again?"

"What? No! No, it's nothing like that! It's just... Pomni's really struggling with her situation. She kept running into walls, tripping on her own feet, and she had trouble telling which direction she was going in, so I'm... I'm worried how she'll be able to handle going on adventures when she can't even find her way around in a simple hallway." Ragatha sagged, staring down at the small teacup in her hand. "If she can't find her way in a straight line, how is she going to fair in a place with no clear direction?"

Zoobile made a sort of soft humming sound, tapping their finger on the table. "Well... I don't know. I've lost my own eyes before." They indicated to their face. "I mean, I could still see

out of them, so I wasn't *exactly* blind. But I guess I can see where you're coming from. This place isn't consistent with staying the exact same every day."

"And that's why I'm worried." Ragatha sighed. "The Digital Circus is always changing. Things pop up out of nowhere in a blink of an eye, and Caine thinks Pomni can somehow navigate it?! She'd get lost before she'd even figure out where she's standing!"

"Sheesh, calm down will ya?" Zooble scoffed, rolling their mismatched eyes. "I doubt she'd want to go exploring. Not with her eyes covered. If anything, she'll try to stay locked up in her room, like she normally does."

"But! Well," Ragatha paused, taking Zooble words into consideration.

They had a point. Pomni wouldn't likely stray far from her room. Being such a nervous wreck, she'd more than likely stay inside her room until her eyes healed. Being out and about would not help her nerves, and not being able to see would make things worse rather than better.

Pomni always flinched and was startled by anything and everything. She'd scream at the smallest thing that spooked her. Jax had taken great pleasure in scaring the poor jest out of her wits.

"... I... I guess you're right." She finally said after some consideration. "She's probably alright... probably."

"If you're that worried about her, then go check on her already." Zooble rolled their eyes.

"I-I mean, I would like to," Ragatha rubbed her arm. "But I don't want to be intrusive. She probably wants to have some alone time to process everything after yesterday and I don't want to... where are you going?"

"To check on Pomni." Zooble huffed as they walked off. "You're clearly too chicken to do it, and I'm tired of hearing you ramble."

"I didn't ramble!" Ragatha exclaimed as she stood up and followed after Zooble. "I was just... voicing my concerns."

"You were rambling."

"I was not!"

"You were."

"Look, rambling or not, I'm not sure if Pomni wants company right now. She wasn't very responsive when I last talked to her, so she might not be willing to talk."

"Won't know till we get there."

"Maybe we shouldn't? We could stress Pomni out more than necessary."

“Good, what are you? Her mom?”

“I’m just trying to keep the best interest for Pomni’s sake! I’m mean, sure I want to check up on her to see if she’s doing alright after yesterday, but I don’t want to intrude on her privacy like a *certain someone*, but what else am I supposed to do?”

“Stop rambling and actually do something?” Zooble supplied, earning a small look from Ragatha. “Look, you’re probably just overthinking things. Pomni’s probably fine. Likely making a mess in her room because she has no clue how to navigate it, but fine overall.”

The doll sighed as they made it to Pomni’s door. She still wasn’t sure if they should be doing this. But she was worried for the jester, she was sure that if they did this nicely, Pomni would feel a lot better.

“Oi! Jester! You gonna stay in there all day, or are we going to have to drag you out?”

... well that plan quickly went into The Void.

“Zooble. Be nice.”

“What? This is being nice.” Zooble scoffed, and Ragatah had to admit this was being nice. On Zooble standards. “What? You want me to knock too?” They lifted their claw, rapping it on the door.

Ragatha’s one eye widened as the door swung into the room under Zooble’s claw. They both shared a look, then peeked their heads inside.

The room was exactly as they remembered it. Red and blue walls. Various knick-knacks up on the shelves. And small furniture for a small jester.

Minus the jester herself.

“... \$#%&.”

~\*~

Pomni wasn’t sure where she was.

One moment she had been falling for what felt like ages, then she was plunged into icy cold water, struggling to breathe as her body was tossed around and around till something yanked her out by the back of her suit.

She was sure someone had been talking to her, though she didn’t hear them as she was busy coughing up water. And then, without any warning, something was shoved into her hands and she was set down on something that shook under her legs, and now...

Now she had no clue what was going on.

She guessed she was on a boat. She could hear water trickling around her, and the shaky platform she was on kind of vaguely felt like a raft when she moved about and touched it

thoroughly. It wasn't a comforting thought.

Being stranded on a raft, with no clue to where she was or where she was going. The worst part? She was ninety-nine percent sure this was the special something Caine had set up. And she had unintentionally stumbled into it.

Pomni clutched the item, which she was guessing was a paddle, close to her shaking form. She had no idea what she should be doing. She was going in blind, figuratively *and* literally.

Was she supposed to be doing something? She didn't recall anything important. She was really regretting leaving her room right now. She wanted to go back. Her room was probably the safest place in this whole @&^# \$&#^\$ place!

Making a small whimper, Pomni clutched the paddle tightly. She wished she had someone with her right now. Preferably Ragatha, if she was honest. The doll's calming presence was something Pomni needed very much right now. Or maybe Kinger's rambling to distract her mind. Gangle's soft voice would be of some comfort to her nerves. Heck, she'd even take Zooble sarcastic remarks or Jax's taunting at this point!

But they likely hadn't even noticed that she was missing. If anything, they were probably going about their day, enjoying the adventure-free break.

~\*~

“HOW DO WE KEEP LOSING A BLIND GIRL?!?”

Zooble's scream echoed through the hall as they hobbled alongside Ragatha.

“POMNI?!?” Ragatha called out, looking out for any sign of the red and blue jester.  
“POMNI!”

“I Swear! If She’s Doing This On Purpose, I’m Going To #&\$%# Lose My Mind!”

“POMNI?!?”

The pair kept running down the hall, occasionally stopping to check in every door they crossed.

“If I find her, I’m putting a \$#&\$% leash on her!” Zooble growled, slamming a door when they didn’t see any sign of Pomni inside.

“O-Okay, wait! Maybe one of the others have seen her? M-Maybe she’s with one of them?” Ragatha suggested trying to keep her optimism up and prayed that Pomni was with one of them. It was highly unlikely that Pomni had gone off on her own, right? She had to be with one of the others, RIGHT?!

She wasn’t.

“You lost her? Wow, that’s a new record.” Jax said in his usual snark, watching casually as Ragatha was close to losing it. “Gee, who knew you could be this irresponsible?”

“Pomni’s missing?!” Gangle cried, holding her head as she panicked. “How did this happen?!”

“Well Gangle, it all started with Ragatha failing to keep an eye on our favorite jester—GAK!”

“SHUT UP JAX!” Zooble growled as they choked the rabbit. “We’re not in the mood for your stupid quips!” The Mix and Match kept choking the rabbit, even as he fell over.

“Where could she be?!” Ragatha paced back and forth, tugging on her hair. “Where could she have gone? There, she, she couldn’t have gotten far, but where could she go?”

“Maybe Caine can help?” Gangle offered quietly, though no one heard her as they were caught up in their own affairs to listen to her.

“... w-what happening again?” Kinger poked his head out of his fortress, looking around with his bloodshot eyes. “Is it an insect collection?”

“Pomni’s gone missing. Again.” Gangle informed the oldest member.

“Oh.” The chess piece blinked. “... POMNI’S MISSING?!” Kinger screamed, having just realized that the jester was nowhere to be accounted for. “How’d That Happen?!”

No one could provide him an answer as they didn’t know how Pomni managed to get herself lost. Some of them wondered if the ringmaster was behind this, wanting to throw Pomni into an adventure despite claiming that the adventures were on hold.

But Caine wouldn’t do that... would he?

“O-Okay, wait! Maybe Pomni is just hiding somewhere!” Ragatha suggested. “Maybe if we look in the usual spots she hides in—”

“How in the #\*\$& would she even be able to find them?! She’s BLIND!” Zooble screeched.

“I’m Just Trying To Stay Positive Here!” Ragatha yelled back. “I Don’t Hear You Coming Up With Any Good Ideas!”

“Excuse You?! You’re The One Who Hesitated To Go Check Up On Her! If You Had, Maybe She Wouldn’t Have Wandered Off!”

“I WAS GIVING HER SPACE! She had A Rough Day Yesterday! Can You Blame Me For Wanting What’s Best For Her?!”

“What’s Best For Her?! Have You Even Considered The Fact That She Could Have Wandered Off On Her Own Because She Thought Your ‘Help’ Wasn’t All That Helpful?!”

“She Would Never Do That!”

“She’s Done It Before!” Ragatha flinched at that. “Don’t Go Pretending That She Wouldn’t Up And Leave! She’s Done It Since The First Day She Got Here, And She’s Done It Again

And Again During The Adventures! I Wouldn't Be Surprised If She Ditched Us Again To Go Looking For A Stupid Exit To This Dumb @\*&#\$ Place!"

Ragatha narrowed her eye, opening her mouth to argue, then paused. Her face morphed into shock as she groaned and slapped her face. "The Exit! Of course!"

"What are you going on about now?" Zooble huffed as Ragatha turned to Kinger.

"Kinger, have there been any new doors that appeared inside the circus?" She asked the oldest member. "I know you took a walk around yesterday. Was anything out of the ordinary?"

"...Huh?!" Kinger blinked, jerking as he looked at Ragatha. "Oh! Well, um." The oldest member thought for a moment, tapping where his chin would be if he had a regular face. "I... do recall seeing a strange door. Though I'm not sure if it was there before or I'm just going crazy..." He blinked a moment before suddenly leaning close to Gangle and startling the poor ribbon. "Am I Going Crazy?! AM I FINALLY ABSTRACTING?!"

"You already are crazy." Zooble huffed, wondering if they should let go of Jax as the rabbit was starting to foam at the mouth and turning an odd shade of blue. "And what does this have to do with anything?"

"Where exactly would this door be at?" Ragatha asked, ignoring Zooble. "Do you think you can remember where is?"

Kinger scratched his head, then stood up. "I think it was on the same floor as the dorms. Down one of the halls." He glided towards the stairs, with Ragatha not far behind him.

Zooble and Gangle shared a look, wondering if they should follow. With an annoyed sigh, Zooble dropped Jax and followed after the pair, with Gangle right behind them.

"This better not be a waste of time." Zooble grumbled as they followed after the pair.



*What am I supposed to be doing exactly?*

Pomni wondered as she sat there.

If this was one of Caine's adventures, which she desperately hoped it wasn't, what was she supposed to be doing? Caine usually explained, in a cryptic non-helpful way, of what to do during the adventure without explaining how to do it. Yet Pomni had no idea what she was supposed to be doing!

There was nothing to go by, and she couldn't see where she was going on this raft. Was she supposed to be steering it with the paddle? Guide the raft somewhere? She had no clue. She wouldn't even be able to tell where to direct the raft since... well, since she couldn't see.

Brushing her fingers to the bandages on her face, Pomni wondered if she was stuck here. She didn't know what to do to complete the adventure, and she had no clue where this boat was

taking her.

At least it had been calm some far.

Aside from a few bumps the raft made, Pomni was actually surprised at how calm this adventure was compared to the others. There weren't any loud noises, just the soft sound of water lapping and trickling around her. A few soft dripping sounds off to the distance, along with a quiet echo surrounding her.

It felt... nice.

Almost relaxing.

Maybe the adventure was to sit back and enjoy the soft sounds? It would be something up Pomni's alley. Something nice, quiet, and not horribly stressful.

Sighing, Pomni pressed her back against the mast, listening to the sounds around her.

...

...

...

...

Was that a rumbling in the distance?



"I swear she's doing this on purpose."

Zooble's comment went unacknowledged as the group stared down the dark gaping hole.

Kinger had indeed remembered where the door was, and had successfully led the group to where he saw it. The door in question led into a dark void with no clear way down. At least this one didn't have a spinning tower of carousels, yet it was of little comfort to the group as they peered down.

It was even more discomforting knowing Pomni was probably down there.

Rather took a small glance at Gangle, who held a small multi-shaped creature toy in her ribbons.

Ragatha had instantly recognized it as one of the prizes she had won and given to Pomni to make the jester feel better. How it managed to get all the way out here so far away from Pomni's room had only one explanation.

"She's down there." The doll clutched her hands together in worry. "She must have fallen in."

“Poor Pomni.” Gangle sniffed, clutching the... was it a bear or an octopus? “I hope she’s doing okay.”

“Who?” Kinger blinked. “What are we doing here again?” He looked down into the darkness.  
“... what am I looking at? An insect collection?”

“It’s more of a pit.” Ragatha said with a polite tone. Kinger looked towards her and stared. Then let out a startled shriek.

“So now what?” Zooble looked down into the darkness. “You expect all of us to just jump down there? How are we even sure Pomni’s even in there?”

“Well, unless this...” She looked at the prize for a long moment. “... *thing*, came to life and hopped out of Pomni’s room, it’s the only clue we got to go by.”

Zooble huffed, twitching their antennas. At least they weren’t denying it.

Ragatha stared back down into the darkness, wondering with worry if Pomni was doing alright. “So...” She tapped her fingers nervously. “Anybody have any ideas on how to get down there?”

“I have one.”

Everyone’s eyes widened as a new voice spoke up.

Just as Zooble turned around to start yelling, a heavy object crashed into their chest. The momentum and sudden attack caused the mix and match to tumble backwards, crashing into Kinger and Ragatha. The pair slipped, falling through the open doorway and down into the darkness. Kinger’s hand shot up to grab the closest thing to stop his fall, which happened to be the unfortunate Gangle’s feet. The living ribbon could do nothing but watch as her body slowly unraveled and followed everyone inside, letting out a sad yelp as her mask was yanked inside.

“Heh.” Jax chuckled as he walked towards the open door and peered in, watching as everyone disappeared down below in the darkness, screaming and cursing all the while. “Too easy.” He winked, lifting one foot and hopping in after everyone.

Let the adventure begin.



Pomni was struggling.

The once calm waters were now harsh and unforgiving. Water roared around Pomni as she struggled to stay upright, hugging the mast with all her strength. She screamed whenever the raft hit something and spiraled out of control, shaking the poor jester around as water splashed against her.

What was going on?!

How did a calm boat ride suddenly turn into a fight for survival?!

Another scream tore through Pomni as the raft hit against something that made the craft lurch at an odd angle before slamming down. GOD, what had she gotten herself into?! It was even worse since she couldn't see anything! Her mind was going wild with horrible images of what her surroundings could be like, imagining jagged rocks and open caves that were twisted to look like horrific faces while the water turned red.

Was that family-friendly? Would Caine be able to get away with that?

Pomni didn't know nor care.

She wanted to go back to her room!

The raft shook, water lapping at Pomni's legs. The water was cool, almost refreshing if she wasn't in such a horrible situation.

It got worse when the raft hit something again and suddenly started to break apart.

"No! NonononononoNO!" Pomni screamed as the raft broke into pieces. The jester tried to stay clinging to the mast, but she was suddenly plunged down into cold wetness that swallowed the air from her lungs as she tried to scream.

She lost her grip on the mast, tumbling around in the current as it pushed her about with no mercy. She tried to make it to the surface, to grab lungfuls of air before the waves pushed her back down and slam her into hard items.

She struggled with all her might to fight against the current, struggling to keep her head above water whenever she managed to find the surface. Her limbs ached, from the struggle and when she crashed into hard surfaces. A wave dragged her down again, spinning her around and confusing the jester's sense of direction. Where was the surface? Which way should she go?

As Pomni's mind was in a tumble, her face slammed hard against a solid object, and agonizing pain bloomed throughout her body.

Pomni was slightly aware that her face was the most sensitive. Ever since waking up, her head was in pain that dulled and flared at random moments. It hurt when someone touched it, it hurt when she tried laying her head down on a pillow.

It hurt so much.

It was agonizing.

She could almost swear that her face crumpling in slightly from the impact.

A scream tore through Pomni as she surfaced, clutching her face and flailing. She was in serious agony, flailing one arm about. Her hand smacked against something, and without thinking, she quickly clung to it. It felt like the mast, but she didn't care.

Pomni clung on to it with her life as the water roared around her.

But it wasn't the only thing roaring.

She could hear water rumbling from a distance.

It was getting closer.

Almost right in front of her.

*A waterfall.*

Pomni couldn't bring herself to care anymore. She was in too much pain and exhausted. She wanted this to be over already.

Bracing herself, Pomni waited for the dip, to feel her body tip over and fall with the raging water around. A part of her wondered if she could slip into unconsciousness from the pain as she felt trickles of droplets hitting against her arms increase. At least by then, she wouldn't have to deal with anything in blissful darkness.

Grabbing the mast as tightly as she could, Pomni braced herself as she began to tip over the edge.

“GADZOOKS!”

Something grabbed the back of her clothes, yanking her up and out of the water. Surprised, she let out a yelp, losing her grip on her only remaining solid item, hearing it splash beneath her.

“MY MY! WHAT A SURPRISE!”

Pomni was twisted towards the voice. A very familiar and uncomfortable voice that Pomni didn't know how to feel about at the moment.

“C-Caine?”

“THE ONE AND ONLY MY DEAR!” Caine's booming voice caused the pain in Pomni's head to intensify, flinching away from the ringmaster. “I MUST SAY, THIS IS QUITE THE SURPRISE! I WASN'T EXPECTING YOU TO THROW YOURSELF SO EAGERLY BACK INTO AN ADVENTURE, POMNI!”

“I-I-I,” Pomni shivered, from the cold chill of the water clinging to her body and knowing she was at the mercy of the AI's clutches. How could she explain that she didn't want to be on an adventure to someone who basically knew nothing of what horrors she was going through? “I-I got... lost?” She said meekly.

“OH! WELL AS EXPECTED. THESE TUNNELS HERE CAN BE QUITE—”

“N-No, I mean, I got lost. A-and stumbled into the adventure. On... accident?”

“OH! … OH. HM.” Caine was quiet for a moment, and Pomni worried that he just might throw her right back into the adventure. “… WELL, I SUPPOSE WITH YOUR CURRENT… SITUATION, STUMBLING INTO PLACES YOU SHOULDN’T BE MIGHT BE A BIT OF A PROBLEM FOR FUTURE ADVENTURES. AND I SUPPOSE THAT HAVING YOU WANDER AROUND WITHOUT ANY GUIDANCE COULD BE A BIT OF A HINDRANCE.”

Pomni frowned. Hindrance? Was she really a hindrance now that she couldn’t see?

“ANYWAY, I GUESS SINCE YOU DID THE ADVENTURE, WE CAN SAY THAT YOU TRIED AND LEAVE IT AT THAT FOR NOW.” Pomni flinched as something that felt like a pat touched her head.

A splitting pain suddenly exploded inside her mind, and Pomni let out a yowl of agony, clutching her head as waves of horrible discomfort rolled through her.

Her face. Her face felt like it was crumbling! Why did it hurt so badly?!

Not just her face. Her whole body felt like it was on fire. Burning from the inside and trying to crawl towards her skin and up her throat.

And then she was surrounded by water.

Cold.

Cool.

Crisp water.

Bubbles of air escaped Pomni’s mouth as she panicked, flailing her limbs under the water and trying to reach the surface.

The surface. Where was the surface?! Why couldn’t she tell where the surface was?!

Pomni failed and screamed, but that only filled her lungs with water, and her limbs, tired from everything, were sluggish and losing strength quickly. Slowly her flailing came to a halt as the last of the air in her body left her, letting herself grow limp and listless. She was tethering on the edge of her subconscious when her body was yanked out of the water.

Liquid gushed up her throat, and Pomni hacked painfully as her body tried to expel all the water from within her. Tremors went through her form, shaking as, for once, Pomni felt a cold chill pass through her body.

Something soft wrapped around her, and Pomni clung to it without a second thought, tugging it close to her body and burying herself deep inside.

It was soft. And warm. Not hot or burning. But a comfortable warmth.

“WELL I THINK WE BOTH HAD SOMETHING TO LEARN FROM THAT WHOLE EXPERIENCE.” Caine spoke up, speaking in a relatively slower tone. “HOW ABOUT WE

HEAD BACK AND ENJOY A NICE REWARD WHILE WE WAIT FOR THE OTHERS TO FINISH THIS ADVENTURE?"

Pomni didn't say anything. She knew she couldn't go against the whims of the ringmaster, she was far too meek and cowardly to do so. And in too much pain. She simply nodded her head, afraid to speak up in case the pain came back.

Then her mind registered something. "Wait?" She looked towards, where she hoped Caine was at, as they floated to... somewhere. "What do you mean 'finish *this* adventure'?"

~\*~

"WE'RE GONNA DROWN!" Kinger screamed as the boat took on water. Water trickled in from a hole in the bottom, filling the boat with cold liquid that threatened to drown them all. "WE'RE TAKING ON TOO MUCH WATER! THE BOAT'S GOING TO SNIK! WE'RE ALL GOING TO DROWN! AAAAHHHHH-!"

"WILL YOU SHUT UP ALREADY?! It's not even that big of a deal!" Zooble shouted, wondering how the chess piece could panic over this.

The hole that Kinger was fretting over was... not entirely that big. It was more the size of a dime than anything else, and the water wasn't flowing in at an alarming rate. More like a small trickle than anything.

Kinger took another look at the hole, staring at it for a long time. "... huh." He finally said, earning an eye-roll from Zooble.

The raft everyone was on was not in the best condition. It had suffered crashing into walls, hitting against pointed rocks, and poor Gangle had been tossed overboard by crashing waves more than once. Though Jax might have had a hand in that in some way.

Ragatha had to use a fishing pole to fish Gangle out every time, though once used, the fishing pole would disappear once Gangle was back on the boat. And they were running out of poles.

The adventure was an odd one. All they were informed was to find the golden... something. Nobody heard what the NPC was trying to say before Jax shoved them off the raft into the water, claiming that it was too ugly to take seriously.

Which... was sort of true. The NPC was a bit ugly to look at, though now everyone was struggling to figure out what golden object it was talking about.

"Golden pencil, golden toothbrush, golden... egh." Ragatha cringed at the golden toilet brush in her hand, tossing it over the side of the raft and looking at the golden objects Gangle had somehow acquired every time she was reeled back on the raft with mixed feelings. What golden object were they supposed to find? How were they supposed to find it?

More importantly, how were they going to find Pomni down here?

The NPC had clearly said that a small, red and blue being had already been sent down here, and it had to Pomni.

She hoped that it would be simple. That they could catch up to the small jester and pull her aboard their raft. But so far, none of them had caught sight of the small jester.

What was worse was they figured out there were paths to this river.

None of them knew which way Pomni had gone down, so it was mostly a guessing game to find the jester.

"Ah-!" Ragatha snapped her eye up, spying Jax at the back of the raft with his hands tucked behind his head.

“JAX!” Ragatha growled, grabbing a pole and matched to the back of the raft. “Stop pushing Google overboard!”

“What? I didn’t do anything.” Jax smirked as Ragatha cast her reel into the water, sending the rabbit a nasty glare. “Wonder what golden item she’ll bring back this time. Maybe it’ll be a golden don—!”

A golden boot slammed into Jax's face before he could finish that sentence. Ragatha sent a grateful look over at Zoobile. She didn't *agree* with their method of getting Jax to behave, but if it worked, it worked.

At least things couldn't get any worse than this.

“Oh. I think we’re heading towards a waterfall.”

... what?

"What?" Ragatha looked towards Kinger. The chess piece was near the front of the raft, looking out at the view.

Ahead of the raft, a large waterfall was laid out in their path.

“D-Don’t panic! We can avoid this!” Ragatha tried to calm everyone down, handing Jax the pole and raced over to Zooble, helping them steer the raft towards a cave. “There? See? Everything’s okay now. There’s no need to panic.”

Just as she said it, the raft passed a sign that read:

NOW ENTERING SHARK INFESTED WATERS

"... Can we panic now?" Zooble asked in a flat tone.

“... I’m... sure the sharks here aren’t that bad.”

Zooble gave Ragatha a deep glare as several shark suddenly swarmed the raft, circling them with their large fins as a tuba started playing deep notes in the background.

*“WE’RE DOOMED! ... oh look, it’s Bill. Hi Bill.”* Kinger waved to a shark, who peeked their head out and waved a flipper back at him.

“Now are we allowed to panic?”

“W-What? No! We’re fine! So we’re surrounded by a few, large...” Ragatha paled slightly as a shark poked its head out of the water and flashed all its sharp pointed teeth at her with a hungry gaze of dark eyes. “... probably hungry predators, b-but we’re still fine! Nothing can beat this!”

The tunnel flashed, and rain started pouring down heavily from above.

*“... HOW IS IT RAINING?! We’re In A \$\*&#^\$& CAVE?”*

“Well, it’s not so—” The wind picked up, and the current started to get harsh, tossing the raft around. Sharp rocks jutted out from the water, and the hole that Kinger had been panicking over was suddenly pierced through, spilling buckets of water inside.

Kinger stared at the damage, watching blankly as water slowly filled the raft. “... can we panic now?”

“... eh, sure, why not?” Ragatha shrugged, and chaos unfolded on the raft as everyone started running around screaming.

Jax, being Jax, had somehow acquired a pool chair to relax in, sitting under an umbrella with the fisher cap he stole off the NPC tilted down over his face. He ignored the chaos around him, being of no help whatsoever to his fellow trapped humans, and was content not to do anything until the fishing rod Ragatha handed him started to twitch.

Reaching over, Jax slowly reeled in the line, taking his sweet time as everyone screamed in distress behind him. “Let’s see what we got here. Oh my!” He grinned as Gangle shivered on the hook embedded in her body, holding a gold chain in her hands. “Looks like I got some seaweed tangled on my hook.” Snatching the chain from Gangle, he gave her one last mischievous look and tossed her back into the water.

Turning his focus to the chain, Jax pulled on it. It was longer than it looked. The rabbit frowned as he kept pulling on the chain, not bothered by the growing pile that was drowning in the equaling growing water level. “Hey, can you guys keep it down back there? You’re scaring away the fish.” He called over his shoulder as Kinger let out a scream of pain from being bit by a shark while Zooble loudly complained that it wasn’t a shark, but a crocodile painted grey with a shark fin tapped to its back.

The chain continued to keep coming up till it finally hit a snag. Tugging on the chain, Jax’s frown deepened when nothing more came up. Wrapping the chain in his hands, Jax tugged with all his strength as Bill jumped out of the water and bit down on Ragatha. With a final

yank, the item at the other end came loose and Jax smirked as he resumed pulling the chain up.

His smirk fell as the chain ended in a small golden stopper that belonged in a bathtub.

“JAX! HELP US YOU IDIOT!” Zooble screamed.

“I am helping.” Jax huffed, spinning the stopper around on its chain. “I’m helping myself stay dry. This fur is dry clean only, you know.” Tossing the stopped over to the pile, Jax reached for another pole to start fishing.

Almost instantly, the rain stopped. A big flashing colorful sign that read CONGRATULATIONS! appeared over the raft.

Then the water under the raft instantly disappeared, leaving the craft floating in the air.

“... Well this is new.” Was all Jax could say before the raft suddenly plunged.

Everyone screamed as they fell. Jax held on the rail of the raft for dear life while Ragatha, Zooble, Kinger, and Bill all flailed about as their bodies floated above the raft.

And then the raft landed on a pillow.

Everyone splattered against the raft, blinking in surprise. What just happened?

“CONGRATULATIONS MY LITTLE SUPERSTARS!” Caine appeared above the boat, with fan flair and confetti running down. “YOU’VE MANAGED TO FIND THE GOLDEN STOPPER AND COMPLETE THE ADVENTURE! AND BY THE LOOKS OF IT, YOU ALL HAD A BLAST!” Everyone stared at the AI, unsure of what to say. “I KNEW YOU COULDN’T RESIST GOING ON AN ADVENTURE!”

“Ah, heh-heh. Yeah.” Ragatha looked at her fellow performers. The impact had broken Zooble into piece, muttering curses and censors as they pulled themselves back together. Kinger was hugging the crocodile that was pretending to be a shark, seemingly unaware that he was hugging the dangerous creature close to him. Jax was already picking himself up and twisting his ears to get out the water. “So, uh, Caine. Not to worry you or anything, but have you maybe seen where Pomni might be? She—”

“POMNI? WHY SHE’S ALREADY ENJOY THE REWARD MY DEAR RAGATHA!” The ringmaster pointed his cane towards the table, where Pomni sat with a plate of donuts in front of her, blowing into a steaming mug in her hands. “AND YOU BELIEVED SHE WASN’T READY FOR AN ADVENTURE.”

“Pomni!” Ragatha felt a waved of relief rush over her, sprinting to her feet and rushing towards the jester.

“The \*\$&%#! She was here?! The WHOLE time?!?” Zooble shouted in disbelief, assembling the last piece back in place.

"Wow. We did that whole adventure for nothing." Jax scoffed as Gangle, covered in seaweed with a fish stuck to her mask, finally appeared.

"NOT SO, JAX! FOR COMPLETING THE ADVENTURE, YOUR PRIZE IS A LOVELY ASSORTMENT OF FRESH BAKED DIGITAL DONUTS WITH A STEAMING HOT CUP OF DIGITAL COCO! ALL MADE BY OUR HEAD BUBBLE CHEF!"

The orb floated into view, 'holding' a rolling pin and a frying basket. "All made with love I'm legally allowed to give."

"As usual." Jax said with a smirk, just as Kinger let out a shriek once he realized he was hugging a crocodile, releasing it and ducking behind Bill... and then screaming once he registered that Bill was a shark

"Pomni." The jester turned her head towards Ragatha, waving meekly as the doll stood beside her. "Oh thank goodness. I was really worried and..." Shaking her head, Ragatha smiled, happy to have finally found the jester. Her smile faded, however, narrowing her eye as she stared at the jester. "... what happened to your face?" she asked, reaching to touch the bandages.

"Hm?" Pomni tilted her head. "What do you-?"

"AREN'T YOU GOING TO PICK OUT YOUR DONUTS?" Cain suddenly appeared between the pair, startling them both. "BUBBLE MADE A FINE SELECTION TO CHOOSE FROM! BETTER TO GET THEM WHILE THEY'RE STILL HOT FROM THE OVEN!" He pointed to Bubble, who was waving the rolling pin in the air as the toy oven behind them began to smoke heavily before a fire broke out around it. "WARM DIGITAL FOOD IS THE BEST DIGITAL FOOD AFTER ALL!"

Ragatha stared worriedly at the mess, wondering if she should take care of it before it got out of hand. "I... I'll be right back." She said with a weak grin, heading off to where she hoped she remembered where the fire extinguisher was stored.

Caine watched Ragatha leave, saying nothing as the doll left before turning his eyes towards the raft.

Zooble was busy screaming at Bubble as the burning oven began to shake wildly and clip through the floor. Kinger was helping Gangle untangle from the seaweed as Bill had started a game of cards with the crocodile. Only Jax was looking at him.

Caine took a glance down at Pomni. The jester was quietly sipping on her drink, grimacing with a flinch. Her fingers went up to the bandages around her face, hovering over it as if she couldn't decide whether to touch it or not. The donuts on her plate were mostly left untouched, aside from one with a big bite out of it. Blue jelly oozed out of the treat, a little... 'extra' Caine had added in.

He shifted his eyes towards Jax, nodding his head at Pomni.

The rabbit slowly nodded his head.

Satisfied, Caine turned his focus on Pomni, chatting away with the jester like nothing ever happened. Jax kept one eye on the pair, pretending not to watch them as Ragatha came back with an extinguisher just as the fire started to burn the floor while Bubble added dicyanoacetylene to the fire.

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a struggle to make 

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